

The Wesleyan Revival in England and the Enlightenment: The Depravity of Total Depravity

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There is no Enlightenment without Protestantism. This religious sect, productive of thousands of subjects, is unique in the world: it denies the world of man, of “works” such as culture, literature and tradition of all kinds. The Jewish tradition, of course, gets a free pass. They and they alone are permitted to have a culture. The rest are doomed to a position of total depravity, something the Jews do not possess. While I reject Protestantism in all its forms, since it is based on nominalism, understanding one of its major luminaries, John Wesley, gives a glimpse into its doctrine.

One important contributing factor for this revival was Wesley's eclectic use of sources. There is no tradition in Christianity that he did not draw from in his work. He focused on the “personal” elements of divinity: how God can be personally involved in our life. This is what Wesley called the “primary” religion: the transfiguration of the person and a rejection of impersonal forces in bearing God into the world of sinful man.

The Anglican church at the time, according to John Kent, was becoming moderate, rational and scholastic. Like most protestant movements, Wesley was able to exploit institutional weakness and liturgical consciousness in favor of a religious experience that was more accessible.

Polhemus describes the Enlightenment in England as debauched. Immorality was rampant, and the church of England seems to have had no way to intervene. Importantly, social inequality was rising as the result of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the Empire. Gambling, in particular, was a favorite pastime in this era. Sensual pleasure dominated, and greed was considered a social good.

Fashion ruled, and people sought to out spend each other in extravagance, whether they had the money or not. To cite one example, Polhemus reports that, in 1684, the amount of distilled spirits produced and consumed in England was about 527,000 gallons. By 1727, this figure was 3.6 million gallons. This is a huge jump that in no way can be related to any population increase. The time period is about a generation. Hence, something happened in between.

Wesley himself remarks as to the extreme levels of poverty and extravagance in England, and speaks at some length about English conditions. His Sermon 130, “National Sins and Miseries” says this in striking language:

It is a great affliction to be deprived of bread; but it is a still greater to be deprived of our senses. And this is the case with thousands upon thousands of our countrymen at this day. Wide-spread poverty (though not in so high a degree) I have seen several years ago. But so widespread a lunacy I never saw, nor, I believe the oldest man alive. Thousands of plain, honest people throughout the land are driven utterly out of their senses, by means of the poison which is so diligently spread through every city and town in the kingdom. . . .And are we not a generation of epicures Is not our belly our god Are not eating and drinking our chief delight, our highest happiness Is it not the main study (I fear, the only study) of many honorable men to enlarge the pleasure of tasting When was luxury (not in food only, but in dress, furniture, equipage) carried to such an height in Great Britain ever since it was a nation We have lately extended the British

empire almost over the globe.

This paints a picture of England. As a result, Wesley concluded several things: a) the present churches are failures, b) that the end times are coming, and c) mass repentance alone can save us.

Polhemus goes further. He writes that the religious situation in England mirrored the moral one. The Puritan fervor was gone, with nothing to take its place. Wesley again, gives us a clue as to the condition of the church(es) in England:

Why has Christianity done so little good? Plainly, because we have forgot, or at least not duly attended to, those solemn words of our Lord, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." It was the remark of a holy man, several years ago, "Never was there before a people in the Christian Church, who had so much of the power of God among them, with so little self-denial." Indeed the work of God does go on, and in a surprising manner, notwithstanding this capital defect; but it cannot go on in the same degree as it otherwise would; neither can the word of God have its full effect, unless the hearers of it "deny themselves, and take up their cross daily." (Sermon 116)

For a Protestant, this is a striking observation. In general, the Protestant movement from Luther on rejected ascetic practice as Catholic, monkish and unnecessary. They seemed to imply a salvation by works. Yet, Wesley is preaching that the lack of asceticism is the problem. When the church becomes worldly, it cannot fight the spirit of the world.

The connection to social inequality can easily be seen. In sermon 116, Wesley spends much time decrying the lack of charity for the poor. The state does little, the church does little, so the poor continue to suffer. Asceticism for Wesley was to fast and pray, but most of all, to give as much as you possible can to those who are suffering. This is the central moral concept of Christianity, and the central concept most conspicuously ignored.

In addition, the 17th century saw something else. The disturbing trend of anti-dogmatic and rationalist thinkers with the church(es). Few were exempt from this. This movement, within the Church of England, rejected ritual, doctrine and asceticism of any kind. It rejected any appeal to tradition or the church fathers. The Enlightenment had taken over many important church positions in England. It sought to reduce everything to formal logic, assuming humanity and all of nature to be one great machine. The problem was that, once you accept this, then a God does not seem to be necessary, or at least, no God that would want to intervene or care about humanity (Osbourne, 1998).

Donald Drew holds that traditional religion decayed in England before Wesley for several reasons: First, the restoration of Charles II, that is, the restoration of the crown, meant the persecution of Puritans. About a fifth of all clergy were expelled from the established church for following this brand of Calvinism. Second, the expulsion of the non-jurors. These were principled and moral men who refused to accept the ascension of the usurper, William of Orange in England.

Many bishops had already taken an oath to James II, and about 400 other clergymen also refused to break with James. Then, as these were expelled, new, inexperienced and far less capable people were put in their place. Finally, when William's rule was irresistible, he soon banned the Convocation, that is, the meetings of bishops were basic issues of morals were discussed. These Convocations were done jointly with Parliament and other members of the public. When William stopped these, the mechanism for agreement on joint action was eliminated. This was no accident (Drew, 1939).

Drew writes:

A corrupt, even dead church darkened most aspects of English life. By the treaty of Utrecht in 1713, England had wrung from France and Spain the monopoly of the slave trade. The financial greed which it bred and fed, the brutalizing-of masters' and slaves' lives, the indignity of labor that it engendered, laid a curse on the economic and political life of the Century. Moreover the Industrial Revolution was gradually spreading and these attitudes and actions influenced many owners of mines, factories and mills in the treatment of their workers. The barbarities practiced in industry were bad enough, but those carried out on slave ships end then in plantations, chill one's blood.

These circumstances cannot be ignored. Capitalism, international trade, empire and slavery all conspired to radically change the nature of England. This is where Wesley comes in. His condemnation of wealth pursued for its own sake was powerful and popular (Homily 126). Fortunes were being made in England like never before precisely at a time when egocentrism and individualism were becoming semi-official ideologies.

Remember too that the Enlightenment was spreading throughout England. It created both the scientific and industrial revolutions. A revolution of such severity cannot be grasped in words. Nothing remained unaffected. The basic beliefs, to put it simply of Enlightenment science in England and France at the time were: a belief in material causes as the only realities in the world, the banishing of God as a cause of anything, the belief that science can cure all ills, that mankind is heading towards a utopia of peace and plenty, that human beings were naturally good and rational, and that political democracy and free markets are the most ethical institutions imaginable.

These features of the Enlightenment are well known. Yet, Wesley refused to take them seriously. It is not that he, or any other religious thinker of the time, was "anti-scientific. But Wesley denounced the above, which can be summarized as the autonomy of human reason to reshape the world. He says in Homily 70 that reason remains imperfect and attached to our sinful nature. The Enlightenment had rejected the concept of sin, dismissing it as the result of superstition and bad education. Wesley, however, pointed out that reason cannot produce faith, since it rests on its own. Reason cannot give hope. It also cannot produce love. It cannot produce love of neighbor or charity. In sum, Wesley comments near the end of Sermon 70:

Employ [reason] as far as it will go. But, at the same time, acknowledge it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and receive them, not as your own acquisition, but as the gifts of God. Lift up your hearts to Him who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not (Sermon 70).

Reason has its place, but it cannot rule the world, as the scientific establishment at the time was claiming (think of the Royal Society, the Lunar society, and later on, the X-Club, all of which were spreading materialism as identical with science).

But the Wesleyan movement must be considered too. It consisted of small groups, intimate conversation, education (especially of the lower classes) and constant travel. Actions, especially feeding the poor, were mandatory. Therefore, the average Englishman at the time could see followers of Wesley, preaching, full of enthusiasm, assisting the poor and

recreating spiritual life in the midst of urbanization and factory life. Wesley and his followers also established charitable institutions, schools and centers for preaching and evangelism. The upper classes condemned Wesley without mercy, making him all the more popular (Polhemus, 1922).

The faith is simple at its core. It is meant to be understood by both the simple-minded and ordinary sinner in the world. We are saved now – in the present. All human beings are drawn to God, but only few will be saved.

Justification is identical with forgiveness. Sanctification follows after. This is the internal change of the human person – it is the beginning of a life without sin. A life, that is, with the full knowledge of God. Unlike Justification, Sanctification is a lifelong process. We are still tempted, and we still sin. These sins are truly remitted for all time, and yet, the love of the transitory things of the world remains. Justification comes only through faith. He writes, in part III, section 3:

Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of sanctification, exactly as it is of justification. It is the condition: none is sanctified but he that believes; without faith no man is sanctified. And it is the only condition: this alone is sufficient for sanctification. Every one that believes is sanctified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words, no man is sanctified till he believes: every man when he believes is sanctified.

Why does Wesley go out of his way to mention this? It is because, in speaking of repentance, he does not want to fall into the Catholic error of salvation by works. This is to say, we must always repent. We must do things that will prevent us from falling into sin. At the same time, this repentance, this lifelong struggle, does not save us, nor does it sanctify us. Faith alone permits us to accomplish these things.

Like St. Augustine, Wesley believes in the internal concept of “illumination.” Natural reason is fallen, and therefore, we need God to compensate for this, to directly pour truth and grace into us internally. Then (and only then) do we know God and hence, love him.

In section 6, Wesley clarifies his conception of repentance and its relation to faith:

I say, 'repentance rightly understood'; for this must not be confounded with the former repentance. The repentance consequent upon justification is widely different from that which is antecedent to it. This implies no guilt, no sense of condemnation, no consciousness of the wrath of God. It does not suppose any doubt of the favor of God, or any 'fear that hath torment.' It is properly a conviction, wrought by the Holy Ghost, of the *sin* which still *remains* in our heart; of the *jronhma sarkos, the carnal mind*, which 'does still *remain*' (as our Church speaks) "even in them that are regenerate"; although it does no longer reign; it has not now dominion over them (III, 6: italics in the original).

Sin still exists in us. We are helpless against it, but, therefore, that implies the total sovereignty of God. It is not justice that reigns, but mercy, that is, justification and repentance, a justification that is dependent on our repentance. Works do not save, yet, repentance is manifest by works such as teaching the ignorant or feeding the poor.

This is easily reconciled by the fact – central to all Protestant groups – that while repentance is manifest by good works, good works are not identical with repentance. Good works do not derive from us, it comes only from grace. It is therefore possible that one can be saved only by faith (like the thief on the cross) even without good works (III, 2).

Repentance is manifest, or symbolized, in good works. It is opposite of sin. This gains us nothing in the sense that the desire to perform such works, and the successful completion of these things, derives from grace alone. Sanctification is a slippery term (if we only use this sermon as evidence). It is slippery because he says two things: in part I, section 4, he says that sanctification is a process. It only “begins” at the moment where faith is clear and distinct. Yet, in part III, sections 13-16, he clearly implies that salvation is possible at this very instant. Since salvation includes both justification and sanctification, this seems to be a denial that, at least most of the time, sanctification and/or repentance is a lifelong struggle.

Wesley is a believer in total depravity. This means that the fall of Adam obliterated any goodness in us. Even the good we think we do comes from egotistical motives such as the pleasure it brings, or the development of a good reputation.

Both Anglicans and Catholics have the sacrament of confession, the Eucharist and assigned penances after confession. All three imply a salvation by works. Confession is to confess one's sins to a priest, and, though the agency of God and the words of absolution, one's sins are taken away. However, the tendency to sin remains, and therefore, penance is assigned as a mode of healing. This has to be repeated many times throughout one's life. The Eucharist also forgives sins, and this too, is done more than once. For both Anglicans and Catholics, one must spiritually prepare oneself to receive communion, which again, implies a salvation concept based on works. In denying the need for sacraments, Wesley is laying out his general criticism of Anglican and Catholic theology (Lee, 2004).

“The repentance consequent upon justification is widely different from that which is antecedent to it” from III, 6, Sermon 43. What is the difference? The first repentance exists as one is coming to faith in Christ's sacrifice. It is saturated with guilt and pain, since you have lived your life heretofore outside of grace, existing solely for the carnal, base pleasures of the world. Once faith is operational in the sinner, the later forms of repentance take a different form.

They, as Wesley makes clear, are guilt-free, since you have already accepted the sacrifice and are wiped clean. It amounts only to a realization of your own helplessness against the power of the world and therefore, your total reliance on God. Therefore, the first repentance seems necessary, since from it derives our faith. This confuses matters, since, given that, faith is no longer the sole method of being saved. One must first repent, and only thereby, faith appears. Both, of course, are the products of grace.

I think we can say, simply, that repentance is the fruit of sanctification, which, in turn, is the fruit of faith. Faith is both necessary and sufficient. For some of us, however, sanctification might take some time. This is up to the judgment of God. Since we are never worthy of mercy, there is no point in seeing repentance (as a manifestation of sanctification) as something that earns us the pardon of God, or, alternatively, earns us a holy life. Our lives are not holy. They are full of sin. Yet, this sin is remitted through the sacrifice on the Cross. Repentance is proof positive that one is saved and sanctified. It does not earn anything. This is one of the central dogmas of all Protestantism. It is also the beginning of cultural death.

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