

Book Notes

Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church
William Abraham, Jason Vickers, and Natalie Van Kirk, eds.

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Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

A decade ago, William J. Abraham laid out a agenda for contemporary theology in his *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. This work basically proposed, with some detours and side tracks along the way, that Western Christianity (both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism) take on the understanding of the Church and tradition that has been developed and preserved in Eastern Orthodoxy. And *Canonical Theism*, the most recent tome in this genre, represents a compilation of essays by a number of scholars on this larger theme though Abraham's voice once again predominates.

Distinguishing his own project from Thomas C. Oden's earlier paleo-orthodoxy, Abraham contends that canonical theism differs from consensual theism, first of all, in that it is dubious about the claim that there is a consensus across "the patristic era, Roman Catholicism, magisterial Protestantism, evangelical orthodoxy and the like." Second, canonical theism focuses on the public, canonical decisions of the church during the first millennium. Despite these two differences, a number of similarities yet emerge when the works of Oden and Abraham are compared. Both, for example, are backward looking in that they privilege a golden age (the first millennium) in which the messiness of doctrinal disputes has all been settled such that the task of contemporary theologians is greatly simplified and reduced. And both maintain, in one form or another, all that is left for contemporary theologians to do is to bring forward the finished theological products of the dead to new social locations. Here the hope and promise of systematic theology, in other words, has been subsumed under the task of historical theology.

One of the strengths of Abraham's proposal, however, consists in its rightly pointing out that some forms of Western Christianity have bet the store, so to speak, on a particular epistemology in order to address the troubling and ongoing issue of authority: inerrancy for Protestant Fundamentalists and some Evangelicals; infallibility for Roman Catholics. By tying the genius

of the Christian faith to a particular way of knowing (often a form of rationalism), the church “sidelines its own best resources” for spiritual formation. Indeed, the life of the Christian community in its fullness of worship and service will naturally exceed the limitations of what can be suitably expressed in a single, often de-limiting and at times reductionistic, epistemology. However, once the epistemological stage is cleared, questions pertaining to authority yet remain, for the church must not only do things decently and in order but she must also give appropriate guidance to those who seek to become disciples of Jesus Christ. Abraham recognizes this need and contends that various churches and denominations must be judged (by a soteriological and ecclesial standard, not an epistemological one) “in terms of how far they have owned the various components of the canonical heritage.”

Many readers, especially Protestants in general and Evangelicals in particular, will have difficulty embracing a very broad understanding of the canonical heritage, a fact that Abraham, himself, readily acknowledges. Arguing vigorously against limiting the canon to Scripture, Abraham embraces a number of elements that have emerged in the tradition: “Canons of faith, scripture, liturgy, bishops, saints, fathers and doctors, councils, iconography and architecture.” With this broad, “crowded” and over-determined conception of the canon, the clear and distinct voice of the Old and New Testaments as they communicate the *kerygma* may at times be distorted and in the worst instances outright muted (especially in terms of the second commandment). In fact, rather than affirming that the early church graciously and in deep humility *recognized* what writings were inspired, Abraham maintains that the church, itself, and in an authoritarian manner, *decided* the canon, a judgment that in a real sense places the church *above* Scripture. So construed, the authority of the Bible may be undervalued in this project, at least to some extent, precisely because that of a putative canonical tradition has been so greatly amplified. And yet Abraham’s proposal does have remarkable unifying power—even for Protestants. When he spoke on the nature of Scripture at the 2007 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, for example, he accomplished in a few minutes what had not be done in years: he united theological liberals and conservative evangelicals who were both equally opposed to his understanding of the Bible, though admittedly for different reasons!

Moreover, though Abraham has often derided those theologians who sought certainty in a particular epistemology (often a form of Cartesian rationalism), his own need for certitude is clearly evident in his appeal to the Holy Spirit to lend authority to his very broad understanding of the canon. “The canonical heritage of the church came into existence through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,” he passionately argues, an observation that elevates some of the all-too human elements of church tradition (church

fathers for example) to the virtual status of the Bible, itself, since all the canons are apparently equally inspired by the Holy Spirit. In other words, in this conservative, “catholic” move, a sacred canopy, to borrow a phrase from Peter Berger, has been placed atop any number of all-too-human traditions that have emerged in the church, and some of them in the context of heated, quite ugly disputes (icons, for example). Accordingly, whatever has been elevated to the status of a canon is uncritically accepted because canonical theists are simply bedazzled by their own appeal to the Holy Spirit, an appeal that legitimizes the entirety of the canons. As such canonical theism rejects considering Scripture in any way as the *normata normans*. It is fearful, in other words, of what Alister McGrath in his recent book has called “Christianity’s Dangerous Idea.” Protestants are therefore likely to view canonical theism as an instance of what the great Reformation scholar Heiko Oberman called Tradition Two, that is, a dual source view of revelation, in which both Scripture and tradition are deemed revelatory.

In terms of the specific canons, Abraham’s contention that episcopacy is a canon of the church (in other words, that a particular polity has been inspired and legitimized by the Holy Spirit), indicates that canonical theism does not focus on the primitive, first century church in a normative way since during that century, as some historians will be quick to note, the terms “presbyter” and “bishop” were used interchangeably. Indeed, it was not until the second century that a monarchical bishop (the kind the canonical theists want) began to appear. Consequently, in this view, congregational and presbyterian forms of polity can only be considered equally aberrant, a departure from the canonical tradition that has supposedly emerged. But has the proper form of church government been revealed in the same way as the gospel has been revealed? Such polity matters are best left open, allowing for differences in theological traditions, though canonical theism wants the matter closed.

The postulation of the episcopacy as a canon of the church may prove to be problematic in yet another way. To illustrate, during the first millennium when the church elevated the office of the bishop as a defensive move against heresy, it was only men, and not women, who functioned in this role. Here, then, the canonical theists face a dilemma: on the one hand, they may argue for an all male episcopacy (and priesthood as well) for the sake of consistency since this is what arose during the first thousand years. And even today neither Eastern Orthodoxy nor Roman Catholicism permit women to serve the church as either bishops or priests largely on the basis of an appeal to this same tradition. Such a view, however, is hardly satisfactory to Protestants, both liberal and evangelical, given the significant theological work that has been done in the twentieth century in terms of filling out the implications of what it means for women to be created in nothing less than the image and likeness of God. On the other hand, canonical theists may affirm the

appropriateness of women being ordained as both priests (ministers) and bishops, but such a view would lack consistency in terms of their own principles since it would fly in the face of the received tradition (and the supposed canons associated with it), the privileged and revelatory period of the first thousand years. Not surprisingly, the book, *Canonical Theism*, is dominated by male voices (there's only one female author) and the whole question of the status of women in the church is politely ignored.

Many western Christians will, no doubt, be surprised to learn that icons are also a canon on par with the Bible, and that they can communicate the gospel in images as equally well as the Scripture does this in words—or so it is claimed. However, one does not have to make the iconoclastic argument to realize that the use of icons in the history of the church has been fraught with superstition and in the worst instances outright idolatry. Though Eastern Orthodox theologians and their canonical theist devotees take great comfort in the theological distinction between latria (worship that pertains to God alone) and douleia (the veneration that can be offered to what is less than God), this subtle distinction is often lost on common people who at times commit outright idolatry. Indeed, I witnessed this very thing, the crazy folk religion that icons can easily give rise to, in a recent lecture trip to Moscow. Nor is the repeated call for the veneration of icons any more sophisticated as the authors of *Canonical Theism* express the desire that they “would celebrate if some Protestant traditions were to rediscover the ways in the Holy Spirit can be and is present *in* images...” For their part, Protestants may be willing to admit that the Spirit can be revealed *through* images but not that the Spirit is *in* images. And so when one of the contributors of *Canonical Theism* expresses his enthusiasm for how images can carry their own “charge” and that, more important, if this “charge” is “of sufficient power” it can be expected to change the viewer, such claims are likely to be cast aside by many Protestants, especially evangelicals, who are more oriented to the Word of God in its power and efficacy than to images. To be sure, John Wesley in his own day rightly cautioned the Methodists against an improper use of images in his essay, “The Origin of Image Worship Among Christians.” Mindful of the difficult task of evangelizing both Jews and Muslims (who were ever on guard against idolatry), he wrote: “Our religious worship must be governed by the power of *faith*, not by the power of *imagination*.”

When a particular period of the rich and complicated history of the church is privileged (by focusing on the first millennium, for example) such that succeeding ages and social locations virtually lose their voice, it is difficult to maintain not only the organic and dynamic unity of the church across time but also the possibility of reform. And this phenomenon is nowhere more evident than in canonical theism's estimate of the task of theology that largely devolves upon bringing forward the theological products of Christians of

an earlier age. So understood, systematic theology becomes the “rational articulation and self-critical appropriation of the canonical doctrines of the church as related to the ongoing spiritual and intellectual formation of Christians in the church.” Put another way, canonical theism actually operates with two definitions or ways of doing theology although only one is formally offered for twenty-first century thinkers. That is, theologians of the first millennium such as Augustine and Gregory Nazianzus are permitted to freely undertake the task of constructive theology, interacting with and being influenced by their own broader (Latin and Hellenistic) cultures. But this is precisely what is denied twenty-first century theologians. Instead, the latter are restricted to the “tradition-ing” task of simply bringing forward the finished theological reflections of others, as if the genius of the gospel were utterly exhausted in the first thousand years of reflection. Here the hope and promise of genuine constructive theology, so necessary for a contemporary setting, has been reduced to the prospect of catechesis as is evident in Abraham’s further claim that “At its core, systematic theology is a robust (an overworked term for canonical theists), rigorous form of university-level catechesis.” Now one of the many blind spots of canonical theism (and there are several) is that its advocates actually believe that theology understood as catechesis, with an emphasis on receptiveness and docility, would actually be in accordance with the methodological rigor of the disciplines at the university level. Such an observation is not to suggest, however, that serious theological reflection does not belong at the university level—it clearly does—but only that catechesis is by no means the best approach.

Apart from theology, one of the most problematic aspects of canonical theism is undoubtedly its reading of church history. Well ensconced in a “catholic paradigm,” canonical theists view the first thousand years, not in a descriptive way, taking into account the diverse Western and Eastern traditions, but in a normative way (focusing on the alleged canons) that only sees unity, even if it is not clearly present (the addition of the filioque clause to the creed, for example). Accordingly, this antiquarian approach is actually an invitation to Western churches to retreat to the accumulated wisdom of the tenth or eleventh century as if this theological move would somehow resolve the current problems of mainline denominations, “doctrinal amnesia” among them. However, the basic and enduring difficulty is that canonical theism never once acknowledges the all-too-human nature of its canons whether it’s the writings of church fathers, informed by sinful, diminished views of women (Jerome, for example), or ecumenical church councils, some of which (the seventh, for instance) were informed by the ugliest of politics. All of this is conveniently ignored perhaps because it would spoil the ongoing project. But even John Wesley in his own day, conservative though he was, freely acknowledged in grace and humility, that church councils can and do indeed

commit error. Canonical theists, of course, can never admit such a truth because church fathers, councils, icons and the like have now been placed far above criticism in their status as canons. Abraham and his followers are therefore impervious to any calls for reform since the canons they champion constitute, so it is vociferously asserted, the unquestionable normative standards of the church itself. In short, human tradition in canonical theism enjoys nothing less than the normative status of divine revelation itself, not understood epistemologically, of course, but soteriologically and in terms of the proper governance of the church. Indeed, canonical theists embrace church tradition as eagerly as Protestant fundamentalists embrace an inerrant Scripture. And both appeal, once again, to the Holy Spirit to ease their lingering doubts.

Though Abraham likes to make the claim, especially for its shock value, that canonical theism is perhaps “essentially post-Protestant at its core,” it actually is pre-Protestant given its flat-footed and static reading of the history of the church (whatever is, is right), one that sees little need for reform whether in the sixteenth century or in the twenty-first. Given the presuppositions of canonical theism, that is, its preference for institutional, formal, establishment religion, the Protestant Reformation in its Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Anabaptist forms can only be viewed as a regrettable and colossal mistake. Luther, Calvin Cranmer, and Menno Simons should have simply plopped themselves in a catechesis class and listened to “father,” until they got it right. But if there is no need for the Reformation than there is little need for Methodism as well, not simply because Methodism is both Protestant and Catholic at its core, representing a true *via media*, but also because Methodism in its very identity, as Wesley and others understood it, ever represents a reforming movement, an evangelical order, within the broader catholic church to spread scriptural holiness, to challenge institutional formalism and comfortableness, and to inculcate real Christianity. Simply put, remove the reforming impulse from Methodism and you no longer have Methodism.

Moreover, it is equally difficult to take seriously two further claims made by Abraham. First, he contends that the Methodist tradition has “enormous difficulty securing a sufficiency of content and practice to nourish one’s spiritual life over time.” On the contrary, United Methodism today, for instance, has all of the following elements which are more than sufficient (if heeded!) to keep it on a proper course: Sacred Scripture, a Wesleyan interpretative tradition (which is so very precious for the life of the universal church), bishops, creeds, articles of religion (based on the Anglican Reformation’s Thirty-Nine Articles), sacraments, persons or saints (John, Charles, Samuel and Susanna Wesley among others), councils, conferences, and ecclesiastical law (Book of Discipline). Clearly, all of this is more than enough to engender and nourish vibrant Christian spiritual life over time. Abraham may have, once again, misprized

the resources of his own Methodist tradition precisely because he has been so captivated by another.

Second, though Abraham no longer considers himself an evangelical, even though he is a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary, his claim that “Canonical theism might well be described as a new and surprising version of evangelicalism,” is misleading at best and disingenuous at worst. Indeed, why is an appeal made to evangelicals at all towards the end of the book especially when evangelicalism, itself, has repeatedly been criticized by canonical theists? To illustrate, Abraham wants to counter the supposed “endemic tendency within evangelicalism to collapse into an anthropomorphic vision of the Christian faith,” in which even John Wesley’s Fifty-Two standard sermons, for example, are held up to criticism simply because they don’t mention the word, “Trinity,” often enough. Make no mistake about it canonical theism undercuts the very Reformation basis upon which so much of evangelicalism rests. How then is canonical theism a new version of evangelicalism? Such a claim not only constitutes an inadequate historiography, it is also deeply muddled.

What then is the status on canonical theism? It is little more than an intellectual and spiritual project headed up by Abraham and a few other scholars. Its life at this point is chiefly limited to universities, scholarly conferences, publication houses, and a few dissertations. This narrow influence is not likely to broaden in the days ahead since this movement is not rooted in any particular ecclesiastical tradition but arose “out of a deep, even searing, *dissatisfaction* with current forms of liberal and conservative Protestantism.” And herein lies a dilemma: if, on the one hand, canonical theism represents anything new, then such recently discovered insights do not belong in the life of the church according to canonical theism’s own antiquarian presuppositions. If, on the other hand, canonical theism simply brings forward a mass of canons and traditions in an uncritical way, never factoring in distortion and human sinfulness, then it is best perhaps to direct its devotees to the Eastern Orthodoxy tradition that is well represented here. Indeed, canonical theism decides between two of the great traditions of Christianity, Rome and Constantinople (that can both be traced back well before 1054), and evidently opts for the East, as if this distinct tradition represented the whole or even the best of Christianity.

But what of Protestantism? For one thing, it is highly doubtful that canonical theism will ever find a home *within* Protestantism, its apparent market, since it rejects the very essence of the Protestant perspective itself. Oddly enough, canonical theism would like nothing better than to bite off the theological and ecclesiastical hand that feeds it. Given this situation, the proper course of action for Abraham and others, and one marked by integrity, would be to join the Eastern Orthodox church that they so celebrate between

the lines of this oddly composed book. Instead, these scholars will likely remain within the Methodist or Protestant tradition that gave them birth, march through its institutions, so to speak, with the hope of transforming them from within. We Methodists have been through this sorry and tiresome agenda before: first from the theological left, now from the theological right.

But even if canonical theism were successful, if church tradition (even in terms of canon law!) were given a predominating and unquestionable role, then this would likely result in the unintended consequences that the “catholic paradigm” has ever been reluctant to acknowledge throughout the history of the church. That is, tradition, so elevated, would not only detract from the clarity of the kerygma and thereby help to render the gospel opaque, but it would also, ironically enough, leave much nominal Christianity in its wake. In time, though, evangelical leaders (just like Wesley in his own day) would be called forth to address this overly institutionalized and tradition-laden church. This is the larger historical cycle, playing throughout the history of the church, especially from the time of the Reformation, of which canonical theism is only dimly aware. Indeed, canonical theism has more in common with eighteenth-century Anglicanism than it does with the Methodism that called it to repentance. How, then, does such a project represent “renewal”?

John Wesley’s Ecclesiology: A Study in its Sources and Development **Gwang Seok Oh**

2008. 324 pp., paper, \$50.00

Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

This recent foray into Wesley’s doctrine of the church grew out of a dissertation undertaken at Southern Methodist University. Its goals are simple and straightforward: first, to explore the traditional sources that fed into Wesley’s ecclesiology and, secondly, to display Wesley’s changing understanding of the church as well as Methodism’s role within it.

In terms of the first goal, Gwang Seok Oh quickly acknowledges (as another leading scholar has already done) that Wesley was remarkably eclectic in his appropriation of tradition, and that he did not owe allegiance to any particular school of thought with the possible exception of Anglicanism. Accordingly, the author marks the influences of such diverse sources as the eastern fathers, the Reformation, Moravianism, Pietism and Puritanism on Wesley’s theological thought in general but not always with respect to his doctrine of the church in particular, the subject of the book itself. For example, though Gwang Seok Oh contends that Wesley adopted the

soteriology of the eastern patristic tradition, he never demonstrates in detail what difference this eastern appropriation would make for Wesley's doctrine of the church.

Following a recent trend in Wesley studies, Gwang Seok Oh claims that Wesley comprehended the importance of holiness through reading the Macarian Homilies. Actually Wesley pointed to three western authors, that is, two Anglicans and a Roman Catholic (Thomas a Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, William Law), as forming the substance of his enduring understanding of holiness. Equally troubling is Oh's claim that Wesley learned "the idea of sanctification or perfection as a process and not a goal at which one arrives all at once." This statement, once again arising out of the eastern paradigm, confuses the matter of the *process* of sanctification on the way to entire sanctification with Christian perfection itself. Indeed, for Wesley entire sanctification is actualized in a moment since it represents not a change in degree, an increment of a process, but a qualitative change from inbred sin to heart purity. That is, entire sanctification is not a little more of what already was but something *new*. Consequently, Wesley understood the instantiation of this highest grace not in terms of an eastern gradualist paradigm, as Gwang Seok Oh sees it, but in terms of the reformation's clarion call of "by grace through faith alone," that is, not in terms of co operant but in terms of free grace. Wesley declared: "Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of [entire] sanctification, exactly as it is of justification."

Furthermore, though Gwang Seok Oh maintains that the Protestant reformers do not count as an influence on Wesley, a claim that is somewhat tempered by the further observation that the reformers had an indirect influence through the traditions of English Protestantism, what is missed in this judgment is the enormous impact the magisterial reformation did indeed have on the life and thought of John Wesley through the influence of German Moravians and Pietists. Not only did Peter Böhler, for example, help Wesley to see the nature of saving faith (in a way he had not comprehended before) but also Wesley himself made the telling observation that he thought on justification by faith just as Mr. Calvin had done. On this topic he did not differ from the Genevan Reformer a hair's breadth. Beyond this, Professor Oh apparently does not comprehend the larger significance of his observation that Wesley believed the primitive church ended with Constantine, a judgment that for Wesley revealed his basic Protestant (not eastern or catholic) historiography.

The second section of the book, the development of Wesley's ecclesiology over the course of the revival, is much stronger than the first and it chronicles the changes that distinguished the early, middle and later Wesleys. To illustrate, early on while he was at Epworth, Oxford and Geogria, Wesley was committed

to what can best be described as a high church, institutional ecclesiology. Indeed, Gwang Seok Oh argues that Wesley held a “sacerdotal concept of the priesthood” at least up till the Georgia period. All of this ecclesiastical stodginess, of course, was changed with the evangelical conversion at Aldersgate that ushered in the second major period of Wesley’s life. Parting company with the recent debunking and dismissive scholarship that has “re-thought” Aldersgate, the author rightly recognizes that May 24, 1738 was indeed at the nexus of a number of significant changes in Wesley’s life, both personal and social. Thus, Gwang Seok Oh views Aldersgate not only as “one of the most significant developments in Wesley’s life,” but he also considers it the time when Wesley began to consider the church more as a living fellowship than as an institution. That is, unlike the eastern and catholic paradigms, salvation was no longer determined “by one’s relationship to the ecclesiastical institution.”

For the later Wesley, that marks the third period, Dr. Oh affirms that “the true members of the true church are not found in terms of sacramental rites, modes of worship or doctrines but in those who have living faith and live holy lives.” Other scholars have expressed this same concern in displaying Wesley’s ongoing motif of *real Christianity*. And though Wesley never repudiated his institutional understanding of the church (within proper limits) a functional, mission-oriented conception of the community of faith took on greater proportions as the years progressed. Simply put, Methodism was understood by John Wesley not as the church itself, but as an evangelical order within it specifically for the purpose of reform. All of this leads Gwang Seok Oh to conclude that Wesley eventually conceived the nature of the church from a soteriological perspective, that soteriology governs ecclesiology, and that mission ever has priority over any institutional limitations. If this is indeed the case, and if Wesley’s ecclesiology was moving from a “Catholic view to a Free church one,” as the author suggests, does this not mean, given the interplay between ecclesiology and soteriology, that Wesley’s doctrine of salvation likewise moved more in the direction of Free church Protestantism as the revival progressed? This would seem to be the reasonable conclusion of the second section, though it belies, at least to some extent, the argument of the first.

Despite these criticisms, *John Wesley’s Ecclesiology* remains a helpful resource to think through the nature of Methodism and its relation to the larger church. And a wide reading of this engaging work will no doubt be of considerable value as Methodism continues to face problems with respect to its own identity, purpose and mission and as it seeks to minister to a hurting world.

Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789

W.R. Ward

2006. 226 pp., paper, \$88.00

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by *Kenneth J. Collins*

W.R. Ward, who is best known perhaps for his work with Richard Heitzenrater in the production of the critical edition of Wesley's journals and diaries, has turned his scholarly attention to the engaging, and at times baffling, topic of Evangelicalism during the modern period. Recognizing that Evangelicals, in the Anglo Saxon use of the term, have found it "easier to recognize each other than others have found it to categorize them," Ward does not employ any of the usual typologies, such as that offered by David Bebbington, to display the common characteristics of Evangelicals. Instead, he considers the marks of evangelical identity as they emerge in situating key leaders of the movement (such as Spener, Francke, Edwards and Wesley) in their distinct cultural, social and intellectual locations.

One major theme that does emerge in Ward's analysis is that of "real Christianity" as it was exemplified in Spener's penchant for the text of Matthew 5:20—"For I say unto you, That unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven," a text that John Wesley in the following century, in terms of his own reforming efforts, could hardly resist as well. Moreover, some of the clues as to how Evangelicals read history in terms of this theme are evident in Ward's able discussion of the works of both Gottfried Arnold and Pierre Poiret that contended, among other things, not only that "true Christianity" had not survived in the church after its early days but also that the "total fall of the church system" had not occurred until the rise of Constantine in the fourth century.

Likewise, the Puritans had much at stake in this theme and their contributions did for the Reformed tradition what Johan Arndt and his *Wabres Christentum* (True Christianity) accomplished for the Lutherans. In light of this, it would have been helpful if Ward had made the connections between this broad evangelical concern for "real Christianity" found among German Pietists, Methodists, and the Reformed and the "convertive piety" that contemporary evangelical scholars such as Roger Olson have insisted is very much a part of this movement then as now. For one thing, it would assist readers in comprehending why both Reformed and Methodist evangelicals in the eighteenth century, though they differed on many theological points, yet found common cause in their emphasis on the importance of the new birth, an emphasis that had been washed out in some of the more "churchy" and sacramental traditions such as Anglicanism.

Though W.R. Ward is a renowned Methodist historian, his treatment of John Wesley was at times unsatisfying. For one thing, he merely repeated the shibboleths of the debunking scholarship of the twentieth century (Aldersgate was not a conversion experience) and settled on the year 1725 or even April 1739 (when Wesley began field preaching) as Wesley's "real conversion," not recognizing, of course, that such a judgment was actually out of step with the broad evangelical emphases found in Wesley's own life and that supposedly constitute the subject of this book. Indeed, such a view is actually far more typical of the social location of Wesley's twentieth century interpreters upon whom Ward, at least in this area, appears to be excessively dependent.

And finally, the lens of analysis employed by Ward is quite broad at times and readers will therefore be surprised to learn of the extensive treatments of the Cabbala, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Franz Anton Mesmer in a book whose topic is early evangelicalism. Overall, however, Ward's study is a helpful guide to the theological and intellectual emphases of a movement that continues to warrant scholarly attention.