

THE RIGHT OF PRIVATE JUDGMENT

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The right of private judgment is founded upon a right conception of conscience as a source of knowledge; the liberty of conscience as a social or communal guarantee; and integral to that guarantee, religious toleration.

The rationale for private judgment is that every person must have liberty of conscience to judge what is God's will for his life. Judgment always involves some form of knowledge whether that arises from a moral sense, an affection or feeling, or a rule of life proceeding from Scripture and grace-enabled reason. In the Reformation tradition, developed particularly by Martin Luther and Melancthon the concept would be crucially related to *sola Scriptura* and *sola fidei*. Scripture must be that fundament for knowledge and truth. The acquisition of right knowledge is found in the Apostolic witness to Jesus the Christ, upon Christ's own teaching, upon the Father's gifts and the Holy Spirit's guidance (*testimonium internum Spiritus sancti*). This testimony of the Spirit is "a state of conviction not induced by argument but by direct perception,"¹ a position which John Calvin held.

For the Reformers, *sola fidei*, justification by faith alone was crucial to a good and clear conscience. Without "alien righteousness," the divine source of righteous covering, the conscience must be confused and distorted. A right relationship with God sets the conscience aright with a greater capacity to know right and wrong. A good conscience is the fruit of this standing with God. Conscience is, nevertheless, an immature faculty. It is possible and necessary that it be instructed and educated. Bishop Gore of the Church of England wrote: "Man's first duty is not to follow his conscience but to enlighten his conscience."² St. Paul deals with this question in Romans 14.

When it comes to natural logic or reason, Calvin, more than Luther, would affirm the world as the theater of divine majesty and truth. Man is able through

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rational exercises to perceive the divine and by common grace he may reach conclusions about God's purposes. Compared to divine revelation such "natural revelation" (so, Brunner) is relatively minimal. It was not lost in man because of God's precedent (prevenient) grace. Luther comparatively would treat reason with suspicion, giving it an unflattering term as "the devil's whore." However this must not be taken as Luther's definitive word on the subject. Like Barth who argued for the supremacy of the *analogia fidei*, Luther wished to accent scriptural revelation. Emil Brunner's well known opposition to Barth's views are illustrated in their famous argument "Yes" and "No" to natural revelation.

Although Luther would develop a strong commitment to private judgment, the practical outcomes of that doctrine in liberty and toleration would not be realized for many decades except in some rationalists like Sebastien Castellio and to some degree in Michael Servetus. More evident in the Pietists, the ideas of toleration in matters of faith would await another era. The Enlightenment rationalists would argue for toleration on other grounds than Christian norms.

The Pietists, as Roland Bainton has asserted, built upon the principle of toleration in doctrine believing in the love of God in the heart to be as strong or stronger than the verbalizations of faith.³ No rejection of sound teaching may be inferred from this priority, as we may see in Johann Gerhardt, Johann Arndt, or Philip Spener.

WESLEY AND PRIVATE JUDGMENT

Wesley like his Reformation forebears held to the principle within the context of conscience, liberty of conscience and religious toleration. As in his many writings these opinions emerged from the matrix of biblical faith, the primitive church, Puritan sources and in the dialogue with the teachings of rationalist contemporaries.

BIBLICAL SOURCES

Wesley's insights on conscience emerge from a wide ranging scriptural context. Most important are his interpretations of St. Paul's presentation of the law written on the human heart. While the people of God — Israel — have the written law, every person has the law of God written on the heart, in graced conscience. Against those who wished to define this as an aspect of "natural man," Wesley insisted that the grace of God is at work in everyone. Defined as preventing (prevenient) grace or as God's graced gift, the "conscience" is capable of making judgments about right or wrong. Found in the Christian spectrum of doctrine from Augustine (369-430) A.D. through the 39 Articles of Religion (1648) to Wesley, prevenience means that God always acts gracefully to us before any offering we may make to Him. Von Hugel wrote: "God always precedes us."

I have argued elsewhere⁴ that Wesley seems to treat prevenience in Christological terms, a logical implication from his doctrine of grace. This however requires a Trinitarian perspective. Wesley does not drift toward Christocentric or any other form of unitarianism.

Conscience, a capacity illumined by grace, does not stand apart from rational reflection. "There is none of all its faculties which the soul has less in its power than this," Wesley writes of conscience.⁵ Like all of God's gifts this faculty may be abused, suppressed, or quenched but not easily. Nevertheless, questions of conscience arise requiring the enlightenment of Scripture and reason:

Many cases of conscience are not to be solved without the utmost exercise of our reason. In...all the duties of common life, God has given us our reason for a guide. And it is only by acting up to the dictates of it, by using all the understanding God has given us, that we can have a conscience void of offense towards God and towards man.⁶

Wesley qualifies his emphasis on the “exercise of our reason” by developing a conception of spiritual sight or sense. Following John Locke, he believes that our ideas are not innate but proceed from “spiritual senses” or a “new class of senses” The natural senses cannot discern objects of a spiritual kind. He insists that

...your reasoning justly...presupposes true judgments already formed whereon to ground your argumentation. And...it is certainly necessary that you have senses capable of discerning objects of this kind:...but spiritual senses exercised to discern spiritual good and evil.⁷

Apart from this sense, which he may call internal sense “you can have no apprehension of divine things.

Wesley echoes Bishop Joseph Butler of Bristol whose *Analogy of Religion and Sermons* were within Wesley’s purview. We know that Wesley read the *Analogy*⁸ and it is probable that he knew Butler’s sermon “Upon the Natural Supremacy of Conscience” Here Butler calls conscience, the:

superior principle of reflection... in every man... which passes judgment upon himself..., pronounces determinately some actions...to be in themselves just, right and good; others to be in themselves evil... without being consulted,... magisterially exerts itself.... It is by this faculty natural to man, that he is a moral agent.⁹

Wesley as we have seen would deny Butler’s assertion that this faculty is “natural to man” but is in agreement with the supremacy of conscience over understanding, without rejecting the value of reason. Conscience is better described as prevenient grace at work.

FRANCIS HUTCHESON

Wesley’s conception of conscience is developed most fully in his literary dialogue with Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, and a teacher of Adam Smith. Hutcheson’s *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* was written in 1728, two years prior to his appointment at Glasgow.¹⁰ Evidently read much later by Wesley, the discussion was from the sermon on “Conscience” by Wesley.¹¹

In his largely seminal work¹² Hutcheson’s moral theory considered five senses two of which have particular relevance. The “public sense” is “our Determination to be pleased with the Happiness of others, and to be uneasy at their misery.” The “moral sense” by which “we perceive *Virtue* or *Vice* in ourselves others”¹³ is central.

Hutcheson gave special thought to the moral sense as the avenue of perceiving virtue

and vice. While spelling out his concepts of vice and virtue more adequately in his *Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil* (1725),¹⁴ he repeats in the *Essay* his notion that virtue is found in that which evokes pleasure or agreeableness, and vice in displeasure or disagreeableness. Actions are virtuous because they please irrespective of advantage. The moral sense approves the virtuous and disapproves the vicious on the basis of the pleasure or displeasure evoked. But, it is argued, may not the moral sense approve the vicious and disapprove virtue? Hutcheson admits that this may be an exceptional condition, contrary to the "general Sense of Mankind," and that reason often corrects the "Report of our Senses." He indicated that any instances of such confusion or "disorder" of the moral sense would be hard to find.¹⁵ Clearly, Hutcheson possessed great optimism regarding man.¹⁶

Hutcheson also discussed the relationship of virtue and God's will. He cited some who insisted that for an action to be virtuous it must have been previously known to be acceptable to the Deity and performed with a design to please or obey Him. Hutcheson took a different view.

When a Person...not thinking at present of the DEITY, or of a *Community*, or *System*, does a beneficent Action from *particular Love*, he evidences *Goodness of Temper*. The bare *Absence* of the Idea of a DEITY, or of *Affections* to him, can evidence no evil...

It seems probable, that however we must look upon that *Temper* as exceedingly *imperfect*...in which *Gratitude toward the universal Benefactor*...*Perfection and Goodness*, are not the *strongest* and most *prevalent* *Affections*; yet *particular Actions* may be...virtuous, where there is no actual *Intention* of pleasing the DEITY, influencing the Agent.¹⁷

Wesley responded to Hutcheson's ideas in his own sermon on conscience. He included the public and moral sense in the idea of conscience.¹⁸ Acknowledging that Hutcheson was correct in asserting that man is uneasy when he has done a cruel deed and pleased with a generous action, Wesley would not allow that the "moral sense" or conscience is now natural to man. Rather, he insisted that it is in fallen man the gift of God called preventing grace. As Wesley interpreted Hutcheson, the philosopher had excluded God from religion, giving Him no place in his idea of virtue; thus Hutcheson's system was atheistic. Wesley further believed Hutcheson taught that if one performed a virtuous action with an eye toward God, who either commanded it or promised to reward it, his action was without virtue.¹⁹

Careful analysis of Hutcheson's *Essay on the Passions* does not provide corroboration of Wesley's claims. Hutcheson was not atheistic. He did not exclude God from his scheme of virtue, but argued for the virtue of actions even if they are not intentionally done to please God. Hutcheson surely perceived the superiority of actions done to please God, over those done from lesser motives.²⁰ Yet, he argued that the beneficent action performed without specific reference to God is still virtuous. Wesley did correctly interpret Hutcheson's view concerning man, perceiving his optimistic anthropology to be in contradiction to the Scriptural and historical picture of man.

THE PURITAN INFLUENCE

The Puritan concern for the sensitive conscience was transmitted to Wesley through different writers in the Puritan tradition. His own taproot drove deep into that strata and drew of its vitality. He read and admired John Owen and Richard Baxter, and through Daniel Neal²¹ became acutely aware of the Puritan struggle for liberty of conscience of which Neal wrote so persuasively. When Wesley set down his mature thoughts on conscience, he turned toward one whom he saw as the epitome of the conscientious life, his grandfather, Samuel Annesley. It is not without significance that Wesley's one systematic treatment of the doctrine of conscience was brought to its conclusion by a lengthy extraction from Annesley's book of sermons, *The Morning Exercise of Cripple Gate*. This volume is said to "occupy an important place in the literature on the Puritan theology of conscience and the conscience-guided life."²²

The extract from Annesley contains the essence of the introspection recognized in other familiar devotional tracts and guides: the discipline encouraged, the solemnity and brevity of life reiterated, the imitation of Christ, the faithfulness of the sovereign God. The extract was from Annesley's sermon on "Universal Conscientiousness" and contained pithy aphorisms that Wesley must have enjoyed, such as, "We have nothing to do but to mind our duty," or "Let every action have reference to your whole life and not to a part only." If these guides to disciplined life were followed, conscience would not go astray.²³

A SOCIAL SENSE

Drawing both upon Hutcheson and Annesley, Wesley emphasized a social sense, or what Hutcheson called the "public sense." Here Wesley's familiar position comes to the fore: "There is no holiness but social holiness." To Wesley, involvement in contemporary affairs was a matter of conscience, and this meant social concern. It was here that Wesley's principle that faith expressed itself by love, in acts of love, was worked out. Wesley structured his view of conscience as socially-oriented in his analysis of Hutcheson's moral sense and Annesley's sermon on conscience.

Samuel Annesley stressed the etymology of the word conscience, describing it as "knowing with another." Wesley mentioned this in passing, choosing not to emphasize the etymology.²⁴ However, he did approve, in a qualified sense, Francis Hutcheson's notion that man possesses several senses beside the natural sense, the "moral sense" and the "public sense,"²⁵ or preventing grace for Wesley.²⁶ The "social conscience" has these two senses. The former suffers anguish when one's fellow man faces misery, and is happy at his deliverance. The latter affirms benevolence, and condemns cruelty, whether performed by one's self or another. "Do not all men, however uneducated or barbarous, allow, it is right to do to others as we would have them do to us?"²⁷ Wesley questioned. However, he would not carry this interpretation of man as benevolent to the extent that Hutcheson carried it, simply because he believed that the fall of man made man capable of acts of malice and cruelty. Hutcheson's view of man was much more benign and idealistic. Like Shaftesbury, who opposed the orthodox Christian concept of human depravity, suggesting that man is naturally inclined toward goodness and beauty,²⁸ Hutcheson believed that benevolence characterized most men.²⁹ His *Essay on the Passions*, as Wesley seems rightly to understand, indicates that no man is capable of malice or of

finding pleasure in another's misery, and that nearly every man is virtuous as long as he lives. Wesley insisted that Hutcheson's optimism was unrealistic and untrue.³⁰ Drawing upon his usual sources of knowledge, he wrote,

I know both from Scripture, reason, and experience that his picture of man is not drawn from the life. It is not true that no man is capable of malice, or delight in giving pain; much less that every man is virtuous, and remains so as long as he lives; nor does the Scripture allow that any action is good which is done without any design to please God.³¹

Goodness exists in any action when it is performed from godly intention, according to Wesley.

Thus Wesley's concept of the "social conscience" is informed by a realistic, Scriptural view of man's estrangement from God and man. Conscience makes evident the act or thought which should be followed with respect to the neighbor, but man fails to live out what he knows. Wesley emphasized that the insanity of war, the selfishness of certain contemporary economic practices, the enslavement of noble men, the traffic of hard liquor, and an assortment of other practices, clearly and starkly painted the deviations of human actions.

Conscience shows the benevolent act or attitude toward the neighbor, toward all men. This makes conscience sociocentric as well as individual in character. Conscience is active in creating a knowledge of the moral character of one's relationship to society. It does provide sanctions for structuring a right relationship, but it does not create the positive power which engenders such a relationship.

It is a matter of Christian conscience, Wesley argued, to express living faith by love. His excerpt from Annesley's sermon, "Universal Conscientiousness," draws this out, teaching the imitation of Christ, the absolute pattern, who constantly did good to men. Follow Christ in this, and "your conscience will continue right..."³²

In summary, for Wesley, conscience guides us to an understanding of the quality of an action or attitude toward the neighbor. Conscience is active, providing a moral perspective to every social action. The pattern of economics, the structure of politics, the bases of war, and social dynamics are brought under the purview of conscience. They are thereby moralized. Wesley's treatment of social issues is consistently ethical because conscience or the moral sense passes judgment upon their rightness or wrongness. The Christian conscience does the same thing, in a sharper, more insightful manner.³³

LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE AND PRIVATE JUDGMENT

In Wesley's views on liberty of conscience we must consider his Puritan heritage. His grandfather, Samuel Annesley, father of Susanna, mother of John and Charles, was a Puritan pastor.

John Wesley, his paternal grandfather, was a Puritan who suffered much under the oppressive measures known as the Conventicles Acts and The Five Mile Act. These statutes, legislated by the Restoration leaders (1660 and after) made it extremely difficult for Puritans to maintain a livelihood. John Wesley died of these restrictions in only his thirty-ninth year.

Great grandfathers, both named John White played significant roles in Puritan opposition to James I and Charles I (1603-1625, and 1625-1649). Charles had vowed to "harry them [Puritans] out of the land." John White of Dorchester was one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1628). The other White was a lawyer who wrote a tract for the Westminster Assembly arguing in a Calvinistic vein that people have a right to rise against a repressive monarch, presumably a Charles I, whose execution of January 30, 1649, was the culmination of the Roundhead (Puritan) revolt. Puritanism reigned in England until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna, first drank of the theological vintage of Puritanism, but in their early years moved into the Established Church.

The concepts of liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment may seem to be synonymous. In fact, private judgment is an essential expression of liberty. Without the latter the former is not possible. Some have argued for a distinction between the two. This is the case in the Establishment's concepts of "passive obedience and non-resistance", i.e., that one may hold private views but must not give any public form to them or else punishment occurs. The Church of England in its Homilies and its hermeneutic on Romans 13:1-7 had made disobedience to a monarch a sin against God. This made liberty of conscience a moot point. Liberty of conscience and religious or political coercion are polar opposites.

Wesley wrestled with this problem when he was challenged to cease preaching in another's diocese. It was contrary to Anglican canon law. In a classic case Bishop Joseph Butler had directed Wesley to leave Bristol. Wesley argued in these instances of resistance that "If a dispensation of the gospel is committed to me, no church has power to enjoin me to silence. Neither has the state; though it may abuse its power and enact laws whereby I suffer for preaching the gospel."³⁴ His refusal was even more passionate in the face of opposition by bishops: "they [Methodists] think Episcopal authority cannot reverse what is fixed by divine authority." Where parish priests "palm upon their congregations a wretched mixture of dead form and maimed morality" it is a matter of conscience to preach Christ's gospel to these people.

He argued further that his ordination by Bishop Potter of Oxford was not to a specific parish but as "a Priest of the Church universal" adding that he had "an indeterminate commission to preach the word of God in any part of the Church of England."³⁵ If the issue were an indifferent, i.e., *adiaphora*, thing Wesley held that obedience for conscience' sake was necessary.

In the matter of preaching and any work related to the salvation of souls, Wesley consistently fought for liberty of conscience in both church and state. He linked liberty and private judgment by appeal to natural law. It is "an indefeasible right, it is inseparable from humanity."³⁶ Conscience is the final bar of appeal; every man "must *judge* for himself, because every man must give an account of himself to God."³⁷

In a historical picture, Wesley recalls the Smithfield fires under "Bloody Mary", the persecutions under Elizabeth, James I and Charles II; prosecution in Star Chambers³⁸ and the act against Conventicles, or "gathered churches" outside the Anglican church. All of these had created suffering to thousands, loss of property in a nation renowned for property rights, and mob actions against Methodists and others. Why the oppressive

measures? "Because they did not dare to worship God according other men's consciences."³⁹ In his reference to natural right or natural law, Wesley is employing a familiar principle of his times. William Blackstone's *Commentaries* stated that law signifies a rule of action prescribed by a superior which an inferior is to obey. The will of the Creator is called the law of nature by Blackstone and is of higher obligation than any other law. Human laws which are contrary to this, being instituted by "inferiors," are invalid. Wesley developed this same argument in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*.⁴⁰ If ten thousand human laws support slavery, they stand under the judgments of divine law.

Richard Hooker had argued cautiously for the right of private judgments unless the law of God enjoined the contrary. With some logic he feared the disappearance of "social life in the world," if private judgment were not kept in boundaries.⁴¹

Daniel Neal's Puritan analysis claimed: "The protestant non-conformists [Puritans] observe with pleasure the right reverend fathers of the church owning the cause of religious liberty, that private judgment ought to be formed upon examination, and that religion is a free and unforced thing."⁴² Of whom Neal spoke is not clear. It appears that his was more of a plea than a historical description.

For Wesley the Protestant Reformation rests upon the right of private judgment;⁴³ loss of it "destroys the right...on which that whole Reformation stands." Elsewhere Wesley would insist on Luther's doctrine that the Reformation is founded upon justification by faith (*Articulus stantis vel cadentis Ecclesiae*). This assessment is entirely consistent with Wesley's opinions on private judgment. Much of his Church, had forgotten salvation by faith. This doctrine was central to his works, and its loss a powerful symptom of the Church's malaise.

In the first annual conference of the Methodists (1744) the question of private judgment was raised, considering the dependence of one member upon another's judgment. In speculative issues they would follow rational argument, but in matters of conscience liberty was determinative. In 1747, this position was reached:

And this is the grand principle of every man's right to private judgment...on which Calvin, Luther, Melancthon and all the ancient Reformers, both at home and abroad, proceeded.⁴⁴

In his debates with Richard Challoner, a Roman Catholic, who argued against private judgment, Wesley insisted that this right must determine one's choice of religion.⁴⁵

Finally, Wesley employed this doctrine in letters to William Wilberforce and others in authority to seek political relief for his Methodist societies. The Act of Toleration (1689) had granted legitimacy to registered chapels, but was not adequate for those who, remaining in the Church, were seeking by their societies to promote reform. At last Wesley registered his chapels under the Act, but he was never to leave the Church of England. Registration of societies and the ordination of men for the American ministry were decisive expressions of his claim to liberty of conscience. By the terms of Canon Law and Convocation he was a rebel. However, Convocation was prorogued⁴⁶ during his life and a Church thus weakened took no punitive action against him.

Despite the lack of official Church discipline, the societies were under attack from

indifferent or antagonistic officials and mobs. Wesley's appeal to Wilberforce echoes his appeal for liberty and accents his belief in religious toleration.

TOLERATION

The meaning of tolerance is diverse, ranging from permission of a minority opinion, or no opinion in religious matters, to indifference toward any religious ideas. Where dissent from an established religion, like the Church of England, is allowed, toleration may be similar to the Act of Toleration by which the state gave legality to Dissenters or non-conformists such as Quakers or Baptists. However, what the state gives it in some sense controls. Where the state approves tax free structures for religious organizations, the prospect of stifling political criticism is present. Free speech and assembly may be jeopardized where a church or pastor speaks against a law or a judicial edict. In America that is recognized in the *Roe v. Wade* case legitimizing abortion. In the gradual secularization of American society the Court in the 20th century takes on more and more cases involving religion. The opinions of a few have been imposed on millions of citizens by the "law making" of a judicial body. That is not toleration.

W. K. Jordan's classic *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* defines philosophical toleration as the attitude of mind "which has definite and pronounced religious opinions, but which is able and willing to concede to other minds the right to retain and practice contrary religious beliefs..."⁴⁷ While this definition may describe Wesley's mind or attitude, Jordan's subsequent opinion that this cannot be attained by an "evangelical intelligence" facing souls confronted with everlasting condemnation opposes Wesley's view. In a society where there is religious toleration the evangelical intelligence functions in a dialogical experience. The evangel has as much freedom to "offer Christ," as Wesley put it, as the secularist has to propose his ideas. In America that was provided constitutionally by the First Amendment, but experience is teaching that "free exercise" is being eroded by some mischievous rulings.

RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

What was Wesley's approach to religious toleration? We have seen that everyone must have the right of private judgment precisely because everyone must answer to God. On that premise God's call in Christ must be faithfully proclaimed. The Christian's persuasion is just that; it must not be coercive or manipulative. With good reason we worry about the coercive effects of judicial or legislative law which does not rest on reasonable bases, let alone its contradictions of divine law.

Wesley's analysis of religious toleration builds upon the Methodist experience of persecution, the Puritan struggle as a background; the doctrinal issue including the question of heresy and the *adiaphora*; and the Roman Catholic relationship to the Church and nation.

As the Methodist societies advanced in England its precarious standing became a special problem. The opportunity for reforming societies with the Church (*ecclesiolae* in *ecclesia*) was suppressed placing legitimate reform efforts outside the pale. Wesley sought repeatedly to commend the loyalty of his societies to Church and state. The Church desired to expel them as Wesley wrote to Bishop Tomline of Lincoln in June 26, 1790:

'For what reasonable end' would your Lordship drive these people out of the Church?...They desire a license to worship God after their own conscience. Your Lordship refuses it; and then punishes them for not having a license! So your Lordship leaves them only this alternative, 'Leave the Church or starve!' And is it a Christian, yea, a Protestant Bishop, that so persecutes; his own flock? I say, persecutes; for it is persecution to all intents and purposes...and your Lordship does this under colour of a vile execrable law,⁴⁸ not a whit better than that *de haeretico comburendo*.⁴⁹ So persecution, which is banished out of France is again countenanced in England."

William Blackstone had argued that "oppression of weak consciences on the score of religious profession are highly unjustifiable upon every principle of natural reason, civil liberty or sound religion."⁵⁰ However he worried lest "this indulgence" become an extreme. Wesley was clearly not a man of "weak conscience."

It is conceivable that his actions may have "pushed the envelope" That claim at least is consistent with Maldwyn Edwards, assessment. When private judgment is raised vis-à-vis societal or communal mandates a caution may be raised.

HERESY

On the problem of heresy Wesley is somewhat ambiguous. By his "native air" he had breathed anxiety about Roman Catholic political and religious powers. However, his definition diverges from the standard view of heresy as heterodox doctrine. In its early arguments the Christian Church had defined heresy thus. Wesley considered this to be a human invention.

Heresy is not, in all the Bible, taken for 'an error in fundamentals', or in anything else; nor schism....Therefore, both heresy and schism, in the modern sense of the words are sins that the Scripture knows nothing of; but were invented merely to deprive mankind of the benefit of private judgment, and liberty of conscience.⁵¹

In essence Wesley treated heresy and schism as virtually synonymous. An heretic is one whose contention about "foolish questions" leads to division in the church. The so-called heretics like Montanus or Pelagius were regarded as good men whose crime was their call to a holy life, reproving those like Augustine who were "full of pride, passion, bitterness,...and as foul mouthed to all who contradicted him as George Fox...."⁵² (Wesley's tolerance was obviously qualified).

He went so far as to question the condemnation of Michael Servetus an "anti-trinitarian." Based on Calvin's own words concerning Servetus, Wesley questioned Servetus' theological language but not his view that "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God." Servetus could not use the words "Trinity" or "Person"⁵³

The heretic, that is, one who fostered schism in the church must be subject to church discipline not execution or some lesser persecution.

INDIFFERENT THINGS

The issue of indifferent things (*adiaphora*) was a legacy of the Reformation, particularly the teachings of Melancthon. It was set within the stream of Anglican theology by Thomas Starkey, chaplain to Henry VIII. Melancthon distinguished between divine, immutable law and human, mutable law. The former was necessary while the latter was indifferent. It was written into the preface of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and discussed by John Locke, Richard Hooker, and Daniel Neal. Wesley defined the concept as that which is neither morally good nor evil.⁵⁴ He employed the doctrine to deny any authority by church and state to punish over matters of indifference. These things like the wearing of sacerdotal vestments were not determined by the Word of God as wrong. They were not necessary to salvation. Matters like clerical garments, canon law, or church liturgies, were the human expression of *adiaphora*. Full toleration on these issues was required. Obedience to church or state officers was required.

The third matter to consider is the toleration to be extended to Roman Catholics. Wesley believed that the Council of Constance (1215) which had promised safe conduct to John Hus (but not *from* Constance) only to execute him, was expressed in the concept "no faith is to be kept with heretics." In this case the heretic was one with whom the orthodox disagreed. This was Sebastian Costellio's claim.⁵⁵

ON TOLERATION TO CATHOLICS

Wesley debated Roman Catholics at a number of levels, but turned recurrently to the "no faith" argument he attributed to Constance. Wesley argued: "no government ought to tolerate men who cannot give any security...for their allegiance...."

But this no Romanist can do...while he holds that "no faith can be kept with heretics." One who accepted priestly absolution or the spiritual power of the Pope could not give such allegiance. The Pope could forgive "rebellions, high treason, and all other sins whatsoever" Wesley believed.⁵⁶

In 1778 a Catholic Relief Act allowed Catholic military recruits to take a simple oath of allegiance to the Crown. Wesley wrote with displeasure asserting that from Constance onward Catholic "intolerant, persecuting principles" would always lead to political disloyalty. The Relief Act led Catholics to interpret it as toleration; they began preaching openly, establishing seminaries and winning converts. Wesley's belief in the "no faith" principle would prevail, even when he would write an irenic "Letter to a Roman Catholic" which Cardinal Bea in our century has called "an extraordinary document," an ecumenical treatise.⁵⁷ The essence of this letter shows appeal for brotherly love. "Come my brother, and let us reason together.... Let the points wherein we differ stand aside: here are enough wherein we agree...the ground of every Christian temper and of every Christian action, "i.e., love."⁵⁸ Wesley could find toleration for Catholics and others who might disagree on certain doctrines but who experienced a "Catholic Spirit" or a holy love for others, especially the Christian family. Where love exists everything else takes its place. Without love, every doctrine or practice is insufficient. Original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, and holiness of life are essential doctrines which are to be experienced. These are "essential" for Wesley; love crowns everything.

PRIVATE JUDGMENT—A CRITIQUE

When private judgment is contained within the boundaries of the Apostolic witness, in the Christian church's balanced interpretations, and the Pietist concern for holy life, the concept holds much value. When liberty of conscience is tolerated, not given under legal constraints which may be modified by subjective or individualistic whims, the idea is very important. Wesley taught that both church and state are to recognize liberty of conscience, not by political pressures but as a natural right prevenient grace bestows.

One of its perennial problems is seen in the lasting patterns of doctrinal variation in Protestantism. Roman Catholics are properly troubled by this diversity. In America this diversity is growing in the Roman Catholic Church, doubtless shaped by the subjectivism of church and society. Catholics in the larger Roman Catholic body find stability in the Pope's universal authority.⁵⁹ The Catholic concern about private judgment was expressed by Richard Challoner's words to Wesley. Whether Wesley balanced doctrine and praxis may be debated. I believe he did! However, it is possible to lift his view on heart religion out of its context of Christian faith (*fiducia*). The consequence, seen in much of his Methodist family, is to weaken the faith—the Apostolic witness—in favor of a subjectivism which allows departure from that witness. In its susceptibility to cultural norms, its doctrinal inclusiveness, the inheritors of Wesley have too often accepted the world's non-judgmental view of behavior. The principle of Christian discipline so clearly taught by Jesus (Matthew 18) is missing in the church. Seldom do we possess the will to test the prophets or the behavior of those who violate Christian commands.

Wesley's famous aphorism united "knowledge and vital piety." His sermon "Catholic Spirit" borrows Jehu's phrase "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand" (II Kings 10:15). This is an irenic invitation changed into doctrinal indifferentism by too many of Wesley's inheritors.

Doctrinal inclusivism offers an easy avenue to cultural and religious opinions. "There are many paths to Heaven," (whatever is meant by "Heaven") it is argued. It eases the path to ethical subjectivism found in many sectors of society. We will assert the failure of "community" in such a moral wilderness. The social *order* is being gradually weakened. Demoralization is in process because the world is losing its cohesive energies.

When the Court case legalizes abortion; homosexuality as a private exercise; denial of the Ten Commandments as a standard for public morality,⁶⁰ and the "'under God' pledge of Allegiance; and more, individualism has run amuck. *One person's* private opinions, forced upon millions who hold to the endless value of: 'no other gods beside me,' describes a crumbling social order. If the Decalogue is to be removed, are we to assume that dishonor to parents, faithlessness to a spouse, taking wrongfully another's life, stealing another's property, longing for another's things or even his/her spouse, or cheating and lying are norms; are these to be excised from the 'public square'? What is to hinder the Court/courts from treating any or all of these as norms? Unrestricted abortion, sodomy, euthanasia, adultery are either legalized or are growing steadily in a disoriented society, a world turned upside down. Sodomy is acceptable because the Court says it is. Legislators in too many instances rush to legislate what the Court says is the law."⁶¹

Our great anxiety is that coercion will replace "free expression," that a society suffused with Judeo-Christian standards will be undermined by the runaway councils which fashion

governing regulations. Unrestrained arbitrariness leads to a cacophony of voices and either anarchy or forms of totalitarianism. We are on the way to relative degrees of these patterns and there is less and less light on our journey.

Skeptical agnosticism or radical atheism seek to remove our Judeo-Christian norms and even its language (especially its language) in favor of their own religious ideals. Make no mistake about the "religious" will which shapes agnosticism, atheism, or subjectivism. Secular idolatries, "centers of Value" (Niebuhr) are pervasive. Only the surprising work of God in spiritual renewal will turn us from the precipice before us. Like runaway bison in the Indian frontier who fell helplessly over the cliffs to their deaths, we run! The church still stands as a guardian but it must revive the radical message of Jesus the Christ. Jesus is still the hope of the world. He is Lord!

Teaching the faith is not like peeling a banana or "falling off a log." Scripture offers a plain way, but it also contains some things difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16). Instruction in the faith and guidance into truth are imperative. Knowing the truth cognitively but not experientially is insufficient.⁶² The reverse is equally true. Jesus said: "You will *know* the truth and the truth will *make you free*." How will we know? "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples." (John 8:31) Unless Christian churches—the people, the pastors, the theologians—hold the Reformation Protestant principles in balance, they (we) risk the radical subjectivism which floods our society. The authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*); trusting faith (*sola fidei*); the inner illumination of the Spirit (*testimonium internum*); careful hermeneutics within the body (*the charisms*)—I Corinthians 14:29-33), will create peace rather than disorder (14:33).

This is the enterprise of the Church. By these principles the right of private judgment is protected against coercion from within the Church or without. Less division may be realized, fewer church splinters founded in personality cliques (Paul, Peter, Apollos—(I Cor. 3:3-6, 22) will follow. Those who fear that loss of private judgment would have prevented Luther's protests will find, I believe, that his Reformation guidance guards against heresy and confusion.

To Timothy Paul exhorts: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers".... Do not neglect the gift [from Greek word *charism*] that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the Council of elders [*presbyters!*]" I Timothy 4:16, 14 - NRSV

We do not think or speak *de nova* about anything. While we are responsible before God for the warrants of conscience, this gift of precedent grace must yield to the claims of Scripture, rightly divided. This is where Luther came down: "Unless I am informed by Scripture...." Like Luther, Wesley was a man of Scripture (*homo unius libri*) "a man of one Book." Neither of them would surrender the historic interpretations of theology, language, or hymnody. We ought not to tout freedom of conscience as unrelated to these as though conscience works best through emotion or ignorance, whether invincible, i.e., willful, or vincible. Wesley used the term "invincible" to describe those who would not believe.

Conscience which is God's gift shares in our mortality requiring instruction in the Scriptures in order to know Christian values. This means that faithful believers—pastors, teachers, theologians—must lead the way to the truth in Christ Jesus. Finally we are all obligated to the guidance of conscience.

ABBREVIATIONS

Journal: John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M., ed. Nehemiah Curnock. London: Epworth Press, 1909-16.

Letters: *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley A.M.*, ed. John Telford. London: Epworth Press, 1931.

Notes Upon the New Testament: John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. London: Epworth Press, 1958.

Sermons: John Wesley, *Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugden, 5th ed. London: Epworth Press, 1961-64.

Works: John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1958-59.

NOTES

1 Lucien Richard, "John Calvin and the Role of the Church in the Spiritual Life," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Summer, 1974), 489.

2. Harvey Lewis, Jr. "A Theory of Conscience," *Spirit* 3 (1979), 19 Romans 14 teaches the need for instruction of the conscience. See also *Notes*, 1 Corinthians 11:16n.

3. Bainton, *Christendom II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 117-19. The Pietists, writes Bainton, "fastened upon all signs of fervour in the Christian past, whether among the orthodox or the heretics...."

4. *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan, 1984), 78.

5. Wesley, *Notes* (London: The Epworth Press, 1966 rpt), Romans 2:14n. He also describes "understanding and conscience" as "those leading powers of the soul." Titus 1:15n.

6. Wesley, *Works*, VI, 353-55.

7. *Ibid.*, VIII, 13.

8. Wesley, *Letters*, I, 358 (October, 1741); *Journal* V, 264 (May, 1768).

9. Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Upon Human Nature* (London, 1726) in Benjamin Rand, compiler, *The Classical Moralists* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937), 378-93.

10. Hutcheson's work: *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections With Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (London: A. Ward, 1742).

11. *Journal*, V, 492 (December, 1772); *Works* VII, 188f.

12. Hutcheson known as the theorist of the "moral sense" developed the notion from the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury did not expand on it. Wesley read Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* (London, 1711), referring to it in *Journal* V, 492 (December, 1772), 188.

13. Hutcheson, 5-6.

14. Rand, 395-417, includes parts of the *Inquiry*.

15. Hutcheson, 62, 286-89. Virtue is defined as "agreeableness to this moral Sense."

16. *Ibid.*, 308. "There is in Mankind such a Disposition naturally, that they desire the Happiness of any known sensitive nature." Wesley's anthropology was less optimistic. *Journal*, V 492-95.

17. *Ibid.*, 334, 339.

18. In his later years Hutcheson used moral sense and conscience interchangeably, perhaps

through Butler's influence. W. R. Scott, *Francis Hutcheson: His Life, Teaching, and Position in the History of Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1900), 198-99, 246.

19. *Works*, VII, 188-89.
20. Hutcheson, 333. "To be led by a weaker Motive where a stronger is alike present to the Mind, to love a creature more than God...would certainly argue great Perversion of our Affections
21. Baxter authored *Saints Everlasting Rest* and Neal four volumes *The History of the Puritans* published c. 1734.
22. Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley*, Trans. Norman Goldhawk (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 42n3. Schmidt also compared Wesley's *Journal* to Puritan diaries.
23. *Works*, VII, 192-92.
24. *Ibid.*, 186 "On Conscience"
25. Hutcheson, 5.
26. *Works*, VIII, 123 (December, 1744).
27. *Ibid.*, VII, 187-89.
28. Basil Willey, *The English Moralists* (New York: W W Norton, 1964), 22-23.
29. Hutcheson, 308.
30. Hutcheson's *Inquiry*, written earlier than the *Essay*, he indicates that man may do wrong but not approve it as good. Rand, 397
31. *Journal*, V, 492-95 (December, 1772).
32. *Works*, VII, 193-95.
33. *Ibid.*, 192. Regarding conscience, Wesley preached: "Every act of disobedience tends to blind and deaden it; to put out its eyes...And...every act of obedience gives to the conscience a sharper and stronger sight..." Evidently he is repeating his view on the "spiritual sense."
34. *Letters* IV, 147-50.
35. *Works* XIII, 499-501; *Letters*, I, 182.
36. *Ibid.* XI, 37ff. "Humanity" under prevenient grace."
37. *Ibid.*
38. Star Chambers were like "kangaroo courts" oppressive, ignoring established rules of law.
39. *Works*, 39.
40. See *Ibid.* XI, 70. See my interpretation in *Methodist History* (October, 1994), 46-57
41. Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I (London: J. M. Dent, 1907) 5,
16. Hooker belonged to the 17th century.
42. Neal, I, xi, 161.
43. *Sermons*, II, 132-35.
44. See Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 136,
164. Outler's source was John Bennett, a Methodist preacher at the 1747 conference.
45. *Journal*, III, 72; *Works* X, 85.
46. From 1717-1852, the Convocation, established to deal with cleric issues, was prorogued, that is, discontinued, by royal edict. Maldwyn Edwards claims that Wesley was "a rebel in thought as well as in action, and only a sleepy, loosely-disciplined church would have tolerated his shock tactics so long." This from a friend of Wesley. "John Wesley" Horton Davies and E. Gordon Rupp, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, I* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 71-72.
47. Volume I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 16ff.
48. Evidently the Conventicles Act against so-called "gathered churches," *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*.
49. "On the burning of heretics." See *Works* XIII, 144-45.
50. Blackstone, IV, 46, quoted by Ursula Henriques, *Religious Toleration in England, 1787-1833* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), 68.
51. *Notes*, 619-20 (I Corinthians 11.18n).
52. *Works*, VI, 328.

53. *Ibid.*, X, 350-51. Wesley did indeed like the words "Trinity" and "Person" but he would not force anyone to use them especially by burning with "moist, green wood"

54. *Sermons*, II 89; *Works*, VIII, 340-44.

55. Roland Bainton, ed., *Sebastien Castellio: Concerning Heretics* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 129. Wesley was familiar with Castellio's writings.

56. *Works*, X, 161-63 "A Letter Occasioned by the Late Act Passed in Favour of Popery. (January 21, 1780).

57. See Michael Hurley, ed., *A Letter to a Roman Catholic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 15-19.

58. *Ibid.*, 80-86, Sections 6-16.

59. Papal authority delimits much of the broad diversity and private interpretation of Scripture. St. Peter warned against those who exercise their unfettered judgments about Scripture (II Peter 1:20 – "For you must first and foremost realize that no prophecy in Scripture permits of private interpretation; for no prophecy was ever borne to us by the will of man, but men spoke from God, when they were carried away by the Holy Spirit." William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed., *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) 311 The NRSV notes: "Since *prophecy* is inspired by the Spirit its *interpretation* must be in accord with God's intention" Second Peter 1.20-21n. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy.

Peter is absolutely clear about the incarnation and exaltation of Christ as the heart of the Apostolic witness (2 Peter 1:16-21). False prophets "in their greed...will exploit you with stories they have made up" (2:1-3); "Of them the proverbs are true...; 'A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud'" (2:22). Peter concludes this letter with a recollection of 1.19-21. In 3:15-16 he alludes to Paul's letters which include some difficult subjects, "things which those who lack knowledge and a firm foundation in the faith twist, as they do the rest of Scriptures, to their own destruction." Barclay, 347

I believe that these false teachers distort the fundamental doctrines of Jesus' life, death, exaltation and His coming again (2 Peter 3:11-14); these are the apostolic teachings borne along by the Spirit (See I Corinthians 15:1-28), reviewed by Paul as of "first importance." (Vs. 3-8). This is the church's gospel and its tradition (*paradosis*).

60. After completing this essay I read Robert Louis Wilkens excellent article "Keeping the Commandments," *First Things* (Nov. 2003), 35. In support of public moral law he writes:

It is unrealistic to think that any society can rely solely on the law written on the heart or relegate moral exhortation to the inner life of religious communities or the conscience of the individual. The sentiments we read on public buildings or find inscribed on monuments and memorials [Ten Commandments] are not abstractions, but concrete testimonies to the lives and convictions of those who have gone before us.

To erase these things from our "common life," our "remembered history" is to engage in "willful acts of amnesia."

61. Michael Uhlmann, "The Supreme Court Rules," *First Things* (Nov. 2003), 27

62. *Works*, VIII, 19. "To Men of Reason and Religion"