

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE WESLEYAN/HOLINESS TRADITION

Thomas Jay Oord, Ph.D.

Northwest Nazarene University

"Come, let us reason together," says the Lord, according to the writer of Isaiah (1:18, NIV). Or, as the New Revised Standard translates the same passage, "Come now, let us argue it out." The writer of Isaiah records the Lord's appeal to rationality and wisdom when presenting Judah with the terms of a covenant.

Various proverbs also praise those who cultivate rationality and wisdom. For example, the wise one writes, it is "better to get wisdom than gold" (Proverbs 16:16). Elsewhere, we find this blunt command: "get wisdom!" (4:5). Numerous biblical authors appeal to the power of reason, and examples of those who rely upon reason to a lesser or greater degree fill the history of monotheism.

In many ways, the rationalities of philosophy and the traditions of religion are inseparably intertwined. Individuals throughout history, however, have related philosophy to religion -- or reason to faith -- in a variety of ways. Some have used philosophy as a descriptive tool to analyze the grammar or practices of a particular religious tradition. Others have used philosophy as a comparative tool to note similarities and differences between religious traditions. Sometimes individuals have turned to philosophy as a means to cultivate fruitful and judicious lives.

We often think of philosophy of religion as primarily concerned with construct defenses, arguments, or apologies for or against various religious doctrines and theories. This constructive use sometimes involves employing philosophical reasoning as a supplement for what is already affirmed by faith. Sometimes the constructive use of philosophy involves employing philosophy as a basis from which to construct particular religious precepts.

Sometimes philosophers of religion rely upon reason to assemble an entire worldview that, among other things, seeks to account adequately for religious experiences. This work in metaphysics seems most plausible when it attempts to account rationally for the widest variety of experience, while humbly speculating what an adequate grand narrative might look like.

The Wesleyan/Holiness tradition has contributed in important ways to the ongoing relation between reason and faith. This contribution is a natural extension of the emphasis that John Wesley placed upon reason's contribution to faith. Wesley studied philosophy at Oxford, became regarded as a formidable logician while a graduate fellow there, and defended the importance of philosophy often throughout his life.¹ He recommended that his preachers and others with whom he corresponded read philosophy. He once remarked in a journal entry: "How well do philosophy and religion agree in a man [*sic*] of sound understanding!" (*Journal*; Tuesday, July 3, 1753).

Although Wesley regarded scripture highly, he also often read philosophy and attempted to formulate his own thought in reaction to the philosophers of his day. Among the philosophers Wesley is known to have read are notables such as Aristotle, Augustine, Francis Bacon, George Berkeley, Boethius, Robert Boyle, Joseph Butler, Cicero, Samuel Clarke, Rene Descartes, Johnathan Edwards, Erasmus, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Gottfried Leibnitz, John Locke, Malebranche, Cotton Mather, Isaac Newton, Pascal, Plato, Thomas Reid, and Voltaire.

The titles of some of Wesley's essays reveal his philosophical interests: "A Compendium of Logic," "Of the Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy," "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," "Remarks upon Mr. Locke's 'Essay on Human Understanding,'" "An Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," "Thoughts upon

Necessity," and "Thoughts upon Taste." Most of Wesley's own constructive philosophical writings were in what we think of today as philosophy of science and what in his day was referred to as "Natural Philosophy." In many ways, Wesley worked to integrate truths and theories in the science-and-religion interface.²

Scholars in the Church of the Nazarene have recognized the importance of reason and philosophy. For at least the first half of its existence, nearly all of its scholars adopted a form of philosophy known as Personalism. The graduate school most influential in fostering the development of Personalist philosophy was the Methodist school, Boston University, and many Nazarenes earned their graduate degrees there. Among the Nazarene leaders/scholars who considered themselves Personalists are Wilbur Mullen, Russell V. DeLong, John Riley, Ross Price, H. Orton Wiley, S.S. White, Delbert Gish, Alvin Kauffman, Mel-Thomas Rothwell, William Jones, Joseph Mayfield, Estes Haney, Oscar Reed, W.T. Purkiser, Paul Culbertson, Olive Winchester, Richard Howard, A.F. Harper, and Richard S. Taylor.

Why were Wesleyan/Holiness scholars attracted to Personalism? Many of Personalism's core conceptions were congruent with basic Wesleyan tenets. For instance, Personalists considered God to be personal, interactive, and relational. Second, Personalists emphasized the freedom of persons, while opposing mechanistic, behavioristic, or theistic theories that denied persons a measure of self-determination. Third, Personalism offered Wesleyan/Holiness scholars a structure to support the Christian stress upon personal morality and social responsibility. Finally, Wesleyan/Holiness scholars were attracted to Personalism because it made love a priority – love from God, for God, and for others.³

Today, the philosophical landscape in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition is much more diverse. Personalism, in some form or another, still exerts some influence. But it no longer dominates. Philosophers and theologians are attracted to Analytic, Augustinian, Continental, Feminist, Pragmatist, Process, Thomist, Wittgensteinian, and other philosophical approaches. The newly-formed Wesleyan Philosophical Society, which meets each year prior to the Wesleyan Theological Society meeting and publishes an online journal (<http://david.snu.edu/~brint.fs/wpsjnl/index.htm>), is fast becoming a helpful arena for the development of philosophy in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition.

Within the past year, philosophy of religion in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition took a major step forward. Beacon Hill Press published a collection of essays titled, *Philosophy of Religion: Introductory Essays*.⁴ The text includes eighteen essays written mostly by philosophers and theologians who are participants in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition. To my knowledge, this is the first philosophy of religion text to be published by a press that seeks to advance Wesleyan/Holiness thought.

While most philosophy of religion books are comprised of short, primary readings from selected authors or brief overviews of particular questions, *Philosophy of Religion: Introductory Essays* offers a lengthy essays that present a variety of key issues in the field. This approach provides a stylistically uniform presentation of the ideas, while allowing the reader to consider central concepts without having to struggle through historical texts with widely divergent forms and styles. The reading of some primary sources is still important, of course. For this reason, each essay concludes with recommendations for further readings on the topic covered.

This text also offers complete essays on topics rarely, if ever, found in other philosophy of religion texts. For instance, there is no other philosophy of religion text available that offers extended discussions of divine love, holiness, gender and race issues as they relate to philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and the Trinity all in one book. These novel offerings fill a void, while breaking new ground for introductory philosophy of religion texts. It should be very helpful to Christian students and leaders as they seek to love with their minds.

Philosophy of religion in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition seems to be expanding, deepening, and diversifying. Perhaps more and more who identify with this tradition will be better able to "come" and "reason together." And in reasoning together, they may be following the advice of the proverb to "get wisdom!"

Endnotes

1 For more on John Wesley and philosophy, see my essay: Thomas Jay Oord, "Types of Wesleyan Philosophy: The General Landscape and My Own Research Agenda." *Wesleyan Philosophical Journal*. 2:1 http://david.snu.edu/~brint.fs/wpsjnl/oord_2003.htm A revised version of the same essay will appear in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (forthcoming, 2004).

2 For more on Wesleyan thought as it relates to science and nature, see Michael E. Lodahl, *God of Nature and of Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood, forthcoming 2004).

3 For an extensive explanation of Personalism and its relation to Wesleyan and Process thought, see these two overlapping essays: Thomas Jay Oord, "Wesleyan Theology, Boston Personalism, and Process Thought" in *Thy Name and Thy Nature is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue*. Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord, eds. (Nashville: Kingswood, 2001); and Thomas Jay Oord, "Boston Personalism's Affinities and Disparities with Wesleyan Theology and Process Philosophy," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. 37:2 (Fall 2002): 115-129.

4 Thomas Jay Oord, ed. *Philosophy of Religion: Introductory Essays* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2003).

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