

JOHN WESLEY AND ATHANASIUS ON SALVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE OVER WESLEY'S DEBT TO EASTERN ORTHODOXY

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Abstract: *Other than John Wesley's description of William Wilberforce in 1791 as Athanasius contra mundum and his use of the same Latin phrase in his 1775 sermon On the Trinity, there is little discussion of Athanasius on the part of the founder of Methodism. However, the Orthodox tradition to which Athanasius is so central a figure had an important shaping influence on Wesley's theology and there are strong soteriological resonances between Athanasius and Wesley, some of which will be elucidated in this paper. The Methodist ecumenist Albert C. Outler was one of the first, in the 1960s, to alert modern Wesleyans to the need to examine closely their founder's heavy indebtedness to the Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers, especially in his doctrine of Christian perfection. More recently, Kenneth J. Collins has disputed the strong connection between Wesley's theology and Orthodox theology and has argued that those who accept Outler's argument have overlooked the significance for Wesley of his own Anglican tradition, in particular the 'holy living' tradition of William Law and Jeremy Taylor. This article will survey recent discussion of this issue among Wesley scholars, caution against too great a dogmatism on the question, and argue that Wesley's practical theology was essentially eclectic.*

The Russian Orthodox writer Vladimir Lossky in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* maintains that the Eastern spiritual and theological tradition cannot be criticised on points of detail by the Western tradition. The two traditions exist as self-contained units, alternative Christian worldviews, each in its own way internally consistent even if not fully compatible with the other.¹ This seems to me an overly pessimistic view and one which is challenged by the remarkable eclecticism found in the theology of John Wesley. An Anglican, and therefore a Western Protestant with Catholic DNA, Wesley was nonetheless deeply informed by the fathers of the 'Primitive Church,' his preferred term for the Ante-Nicene writers. The Orthodox tradition to which Athanasius is so central a figure had an important shaping influence on Wesley's theology and there are strong soteriological resonances between Athanasius and Wesley, some of which I hope to elucidate in this paper.

Wesley and the Fathers

In the current renewal of interest in the Eastern orthodox tradition on the part of the West, it is not surprising that Wesleyan scholars have played their part in analysing John Wesley's patristic sources.² The Methodist ecumenist, Dr. Albert Cook Outler,

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), 7-22. I am drawing here on an observation by Rowan Williams in his essay 'Lossky, the *Via Negativa* and the Foundations of Theology,' in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 17.

² For a good survey of thinking on Wesley's debt to Eastern Orthodoxy see Randy L. Maddox, 'John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 45.2 (1990): 29-53

was one of the first to have alerted modern Wesleyans to the need closely to examine Wesley's heavy indebtedness to the Ante-Nicene fathers.³ Wesley himself admits such influence in his *Advice to the Clergy* (1756).

Can any who spend several years in those seats of learning be excused if they do not [read] the Fathers, the most authentic commentators on Scripture, as being both nearest the fountain, eminently endued with the Spirit by whom all Scripture was given. It will be easily perceived, I speak chiefly of those who wrote before the Council of Nicea. But who could not likewise desire to have some acquaintance with those that followed them? with St. Chrysostom, Basil, Austin [Augustine], and above all, the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus?⁴

The writings of John Chrysostom, for whom Anglican primitivists of Wesley's day had a special regard, were first introduced to John by his father, Samuel. As John prepared to enter holy orders, Samuel recommended a list of sources. He repeatedly recommends St. John Chrysostom and in particular urges him to 'master' and 'digest' Chrysostom's 'On the Priesthood'⁵ J. Steve McCormack, in his 1984 doctoral dissertation, has demonstrated how allusions to Chrysostom may be identified throughout Wesley's *Works*.⁶ To this list of sources might be added Clement of Alexandria (whose work seems to have been used by Wesley as a model for his 1742 tract, *The Character of a Methodist* and whose 'Gnostic Christian' closely parallels Wesley's 'perfect Christian'), as well as Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Macarius the Egyptian.⁷

One recent scholar who has disputed the strong connection between Wesley's theology and the Eastern fathers is Kenneth J. Collins, who argues that recent scholars who have picked up on Outler's argument have overlooked the greater significance of the Anglican tradition on his thinking, in particular the writings of William Law and Jeremy Taylor, and of the Catholic writer, Thomas a Kempis.⁸ A series of formal consultations between the United Methodist Church and St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary has resulted in substantial publications covering Orthodox and Wesleyan perspectives on spirituality, ecclesiology and scriptural interpretation, an indication that finding resonances between the two traditions is of ongoing mutual concern.⁹

³ Albert Cook Outler, ed. *The Sermons of John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), viii-ix. See also 'John Wesley's Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church,' *Bulletin of the United Church of Canada Committee on Archives and History* 29 (1980-2): 5-17.

⁴ John Wesley, 'Address to the Clergy,' in Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press reprint) 10:84. Augustine is the only Western writer included in this list. For an interesting discussion of Wesley and Ephraem Syrus see Gordon S. Wakefield, 'John Wesley and Ephraem Syrus,' *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2, 273-86.

⁵ Wesley, *BCE*, 25:171; 2:518.

⁶ J. Steve McCormack, 'John Wesley's Use of John Chrysostom on the Christian Life: Faith Filled with the Energy of Love,' unpublished PhD dissertation, Drew University, 1994.

⁷ John English, 'The Path to Perfection in Pseudo-Macarius and John Wesley,' *Pacifica* 11:1 (1998), 54-62. See also, David Bundy, 'Christian Virtue: John Wesley and the Alexandrian Tradition,' in *The Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 26:1 (Spring 1991): 146-7.

⁸ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 209 (footnote 4).

⁹ S.T. Kimbrough Jr., ed. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2002); *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Interpretation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2006); *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2007).

It must be remembered that the Wesley brothers were at Oxford during a period of renewal of interest in the 'primitive church.' The study of the Greek New Testament and the adoption of spiritual disciplines drawn from the monasticism of the East were hallmarks of the Oxford Methodists. An emphasis on holiness as disciplined love set the parameters for this 'first rise of Methodism.'¹⁰ Wesley was drawing on an Anglican divinity already steeped in the Greek Fathers. In Thomas Cranmer, in Richard Hooker, in Lancelot Andrewes, we find the same human-divine synthesis so characteristic of Wesley. Speaking of Andrewes' Whitsun sermons, Nicholas Lossky explains the pneumatology in the theology of Andrewes as a result of 'the stress which he puts on the deification of man as the supreme goal of the way of salvation. It is a question of the union of man with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit.'¹¹ This brings to mind the Prayer of Humble Access recited in every Anglican Communion service which expresses the desire 'that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.' Also significant was the influence on Wesley of the Non-jurors with their decided preference for the Primitive church.

These Anglican precedents are perhaps an indication of the manner in which English Christianity had preserved to some degree the theological consensus and attendant spirituality of the first five centuries, a consensus hugely indebted to Eastern thinkers. Wesley did engage in a direct study of selected Eastern fathers, and recommended several of them to the people called Methodists in his 30-volume *Christian Library*.¹² However, it might be argued that the broad shape of his soteriology is drawn, not exclusively from his reading of the Fathers but also from an almost unconscious inheritance of these views in the Anglicanism of the Book of Common Prayer, the 39 Articles, and the Edwardian Homilies, to which Wesley again and again appealed in his disputes with his fellow Anglicans. It is best however to avoid being dogmatic about Wesley's theological influences, especially given the eclectic nature of his identified sources.

In both John Wesley and Athanasius there is an emphasis on practical theology which stands in contrast to the tendency in the Western tradition to view theology as a theoretical science.¹³ The term "practical theology" may bring to mind the idea of learning how to do certain things - increase your church's membership, write a better sermon, or plan a good funeral. This is not how the term is used here. Both Wesley and Athanasius have a "practical theology" because they were both dealing primarily with the "practice" of living the Christian life. It is an "experiential" approach to theology (or to use Wesley's eighteenth century word, "experimental"). Thomas Langford describes such an approach as "a holistic or balanced strategy in which doctrine and experience, gospel and life, grow together as mutually informing

¹⁰ Richard P. Heitzenrater uses this term in reference to Wesley's Oxford days in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 33-58

¹¹ Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes, Le Prédicateur* (Paris: 1986), 327. See Florence Higham's brief biography, *Lancelot Andrewes* (London: SCM, 1952) and Alexander Whyte, ed. *Lancelot Andrewes and His Private Devotions: A Biography, a Transcript, and an Interpretation* (London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1896).

¹² John Wesley, ed., *Wesley's Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue*. 30 vols. (London: T. Cordeux, 1819).

¹³ Randy L. Maddox, "Recovering Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650-72.

dimensions of the theological enterprise.”¹⁴ It is perhaps partly due to this practical focus that Wesley’s theology was so eclectic. He drew upon early church sources, as well as Puritan authors, Moravians, Anglicans and Catholic mystics, not because he was deeply committed to any particular tradition but because in all these he found resources for the spiritual lives of the people called Methodist, whom he saw as his particular responsibility.

Athanasius on Salvation¹⁵

Many contemporary theologians have felt that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan settlement, though a monumental achievement in itself, left some unfinished business. It left us, according to Ted Peters, ‘with an eternal immanent Trinity with only a dubious tie to the economic Trinity responsible for the saving work in history.’¹⁶ Post-Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy, it is claimed, exhibited an increasing concern with the inner relations of the persons within the Godhead (the immanent Trinity), often to the neglect of the relations between the persons in the work of salvation (the economic Trinity). The work of Athanasius to some extent challenges this assumption. I want to examine here some representative selections from Athanasius’ early writings and demonstrate if I can the close link he maintained between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. I will then consider John Wesley’s *Sermon on the Trinity* and identify resonances between the practical theologies of the two theologians.

Saint Athanasius’ early treatises, *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* form a two-volume work. Once considered to have been written c. 318, prior to the Nicene Council, Khaled Anatolios has argued for the possibility of a Post-Nicene date in the 330s. In *Against the Gentiles* Athanasius draws distinctions between Creator and creation and argues for the dependence of the creation upon the Creator. Paganism is deemed inadequate to explain the unity and harmony of the universe.¹⁷ In the second work, *On the Incarnation* written soon after, Athanasius sets out an argument for the full divinity of Christ based on fallen humanity’s propensity toward non-being and the Incarnation of the Logos, which reverses that direction. He developed his soteriology against the backdrop of profound human sinfulness and creation’s natural mortality.¹⁸ Humanity, created ‘out of nothing’ is constantly being drawn back toward that non-being from which it was created. The fall into sin propelled the human race headlong toward its own annihilation, each person becoming a victim of his or her own sinful propensities. The Nicene orthodoxy insisted that only a Saviour who had created all things ‘out of nothing,’ *and thus was not himself* created, was able to redeem humanity. In order that the Logos be able to redeem humanity it was necessary that ‘the Logos not belong to things that had an

¹⁴ Philip Meadows’ review of Randy Maddox, ed. *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville; Kingswood, 1998), in *The Christian Century*, Feb 17, 1999.

¹⁵ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Doru Costache of Saint Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College, Sydney, for the expert advice he has given me on Athanasius for this section of the paper.

¹⁶ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1993), 9.

¹⁷ Athanasius, ‘*Contra Gentes*’ [or ‘Against the Gentiles’ i.e. ‘Pagans’], 8 in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers vol. 4 Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*. 1829 reprint (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

¹⁸ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi* [or ‘On the Incarnation of the Word’] IV:2-3; in Schaff, NPNF IV.

origin, but be their framer himself.’¹⁹ As Jaroslav Pelikan explained it, ‘Only he who had called men out of non-being into being would be able to recall them after they had fallen back into the nothingness that threatened them.’²⁰

The anthropology of Athanasius demonstrated in vivid detail...the human condition of sin, corruption and death. By turning away from God in disobedience, men ‘became the cause of their own corruption in death.’ This state, moreover, was deteriorating progressively and men had become ‘insatiable in sinning.’ Not satisfied with the first sin, men ‘again filled themselves with other evils, progressing still further in shamefulness and outdoing themselves in impiety.’ Neither sun nor moon nor stars had fallen away from God; only man was vile. Viewed against this backdrop, the incarnation of the Logos was seen as the only means of rescue for fallen mankind.²¹

It is interesting to note that, according to Pelikan, it was ‘the universality of death’ rather than the ‘universality of sin’ that was at the centre of Athanasius’ anthropology. There had been many, such as John the Baptist and Jeremiah who had been ‘pure of every sin,’ yet these were still subject to, and needed deliverance from, death. Death could be overcome only by a participation in the divine nature, a participation made possible only through the incarnation of the Word.²²

Athanasius focuses on the Incarnation as the means whereby God enters into human existence for the purpose of elevating those subject to the propensity toward death into the divine life of immortality.

The reason of his coming was because of us, and...our transgressions called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men. For of his becoming Incarnate we were the object, and for our salvation He dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body.²³

Though Athanasius was an obscure and little known deacon at the Council of Nicaea it was his profound exposition of the Incarnation that later came to shape the Nicene Christology in subsequent disputes with the bewildering variety of Arianisms that emerged. The Arian disputants at Nicaea were more likely to have been responding to Alexander of Alexandria in their assertion that the Word was not fully divine, but merely the highest creation of God. Later they would have to deal with the full-blooded incarnational soteriology of Athanasius whose argument that the ‘one who was of the same stuff as God the Father became [hu]man for our salvation’ became the cornerstone of Orthodox Christology.²⁴ In ‘Against the Arians,’ we find

¹⁹ Athanasius, ‘Orations Against the Arians,’ II:69-70.

²⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Christian Tradition 100-600* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 205, 285.

²¹ Pelikan, 285, citing Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, V:3; XLIII:1; and *Contra Gentes*, 8.

²² Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* III:33, 40, cited in Pelikan, 285.

²³ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, IV:2-3; in Schaff, NPNF IV:38.

²⁴ Edward Rochie Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 49. The way in which this doctrine entered into the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church (if it wasn’t there already in unreflective usage), might be illustrated by the following prayer from the Leonine Sacramentary. ‘O God who didst wonderfully create and yet more wonderfully renew the dignity of

Athanasius holding to the same line. ‘The truth shows us that the Word is not of things originate, but rather Himself their Framer, that He might deify it in Himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness.’²⁵

Athanasius is concerned also to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit and sets forth an argument based on the Spirit’s relationship as well as the Spirit’s saving work in baptism. ‘The Son is in the Father, as His own Word and Radiance; but we, apart from the Spirit, are strange and distant from God, and by the participation of the Spirit, we are knit into the Godhead.’²⁶ Athanasius’ *Letters to Serapion on the Divinity of the Holy Spirit*, along with Saint Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit* which was likely influenced by the *Letters*, laid down the theological formulations that would eventually become the official pneumatology of the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE and which is now enshrined in the present Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.²⁷ There were many in the post-Nicene church who sided with Athanasius against the Arians on the Incarnation of the Logos who were nonetheless unwilling to concede the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. These conceived of the Spirit as a creature, a ministering spirit, differing from angels only in degree.²⁸ Athanasius begs to differ, asserting that ‘the Spirit of God is neither angel nor creature, but belongs to the Godhead.’ According to Athanasius any hesitancy to ascribe full divinity to the Person of the Holy Spirit constituted a denial of Nicene loyalty.

Where others, such as Didymus, related the Spirit to the entire Godhead, Athanasius found the proof of the Spirit as *homoousios* by relating the Spirit to the Son.²⁹ Athanasius had earlier argued that since the Spirit is related to the Son in the same way the Son is related to the Father, then neither the Son nor the Spirit could be creatures. Athanasius argued for the divinity of the Spirit on the basis of the following methodological principle. ‘If we must take our knowledge of the Spirit from the Son, then it is appropriate to put forward proofs which derive from him [the Son].’³⁰ The argument had already worked in the opposite direction: The Holy Spirit is the gift of God. The Son bestows the gift of the Spirit. Therefore, the Son is God. Now he argues that since our knowledge of the Son derives from the Spirit, and since the Son is God, therefore the Spirit, who gives us knowledge of the Son, must also be divine.

Just as Athanasius proved the divinity of the Logos, through his role as the Incarnate Saviour of the world, even so, the divinity of the Holy Spirit is proved through the Spirit’s saving activity. ‘The Holy Spirit was God because he did what only God could do. If the creatures were the objects of his renewing, creating, and sanctifying activity, he could not belong to the same class of beings as they, but had to be

human nature, grant that (by this mystery of water and wine) we may be partakers of his divinity who vouchsafed to share our humanity, Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord.’ Cited in Hardy, 49. For a discussion of the impact of the Arian heresy on the church’s liturgy see Glen O’Brien, ‘The Effects of the Arian Controversy on the Liturgy of the Post-Nicene Church,’ *Aldersgate Papers*, vol. 3 (Sept. 2002): 21-28.

²⁵ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* (or ‘Discourse Against the Arians’) II:70, in Schaff, NPNF IV:386.

²⁶ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, III:24, in NPNF IV:406-7.

²⁷ Charles Kannengiesser, ‘Athanasius (ca. 300-373),’ in Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Vol. 1 A-K, 2nd, ed. (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 139.

²⁸ Athanasius, *Epistles to Serapion on the Divinity of the Holy Spirit*, I:1.

²⁹ Pelikan, 214.

³⁰ Athanasius, ‘Epistles to Serapion,’ III: 4.

divine...[A]s the one who justified sinners and perfected the elect, the Holy Spirit did what was appropriate only to God.’³¹ With the application of the Trinitarian baptismal formula, whoever is baptised by the Father is baptised also by the Son, and by the Spirit.³² Since baptism provides that regeneration which makes salvation possible, to reject the full divinity of the Holy Spirit who provides such regeneration, is to cast away salvation itself.³³

In summary, St. Athanasius couched his Trinitarian theology squarely in the context of God’s saving work in Christ. The divinity of Christ was defended on the basis of the Incarnation of the Logos, who, through entering into human existence and conquering death, reversed the human propensity toward non-being. He argued, further, for the full divinity of Christ on the basis of the death and resurrection of the Incarnate Logos, which elevates fallen humanity to become partakers of the divine nature. The Son of Man became human that humanity might become no longer only sons and daughters of Adam and Eve but also sons and daughters of God. This is made possible through the Divine Spirit who, in the context of his relationship to the Father and the Son bestows saving knowledge of Christ, and who, in the application of the Trinitarian formula in baptism, brings new life and salvation. In light of these findings, the claim of some contemporary Trinitarian theologians that the Nicene Christology obscured the ‘economic’ Trinity behind a concern for the ‘immanent’ or ‘ontological’ Trinity cannot remain entirely unchallenged. At least in Athanasius, we see a doctrine of the Trinity thoroughly grounded in God’s work for the salvation of fallen humanity. We see a very similar approach in John Wesley’s approach to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Wesley, the Trinity and Salvation

It is important in the comparative study of any two thinkers to make a distinction between influence and resonance. Edgardo A. Colon Emeric has demonstrated this distinction well in his recent book *Wesley, Aquinas and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue*.³⁴ While there is little evidence for deep engagement with Aquinas’ writings on Wesley’s part there are nonetheless resonances between the two theologians that are valuable and informative. The same may be said in regard to Wesley and Athanasius. Other than his description of William Wilberforce in 1791 as *Athanasius contra mundum* and his use of the same Latin phrase in his 1775 sermon *On the Trinity*, there is little discussion of Athanasius in the writings of the founder of Methodism.³⁵ However, there are strong soteriological resonances between Athanasius and Wesley. The tight connection between the Trinity and salvation is one such connection. Another is the linking of salvation with divinisation.

³¹ Pelikan, 215-16.

³² Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, II:241, in Schaff, NPNF IV: 370.

³³ Pelikan, 216-17.

³⁴ Edgardo A. Colon Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

³⁵ Wesley approved of the Athanasian Creed, though he rejects its damnatory clauses, and its claim that a subscription to its precise explication of the Trinity was necessary to salvation. *Works, Vol. 2, Sermons II: 34-70* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 377. However the Creed is not the work of Athanasius so it will not concern us here.

John Wesley's only sermon explicitly devoted to the subject of the Trinity was published in Ireland in 1775 under the title, 'A Sermon on 1st John, v.7.'³⁶ In it he fully accepted the Orthodox view of the Trinity but did not insist on the technical terms. This may perhaps have been a reaction to certain rationalizing tendencies in Anglican treatments of the subject, such as those of Richard Hooker, George Bull, and Thomas Sherlock.³⁷ Wesley argued that there are many things that lie beyond human comprehension, yet we have no trouble in believing in them and listed as examples of these incomprehensible certainties, such things as the motion of the sun, of light, and air, the earth, and the existence of the body and soul.³⁸ In just the same way, though we cannot understand the precise mode of being within the mystery of the Divine Being, we still intuitively know that such relations must exist, not so much by any process of thought, as through Christian experience. The 'knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion.'³⁹ This epistemological stance is of course in keeping with the Lockean empiricism of Wesley's day with its emphasis on the direct experience of the senses. Wesley concludes, 'Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that the Three are One.'⁴⁰

Though babes in Christ could not expect it, fathers in Christ might even share, with the Marquis de Renty, the immediate existential apprehension of the Trinity in an 'experimental verity, and a plenitude of the presence of the ever blessed Trinity.'⁴¹ But even the merest babe in Christ experiences salvation in clearly Trinitarian fashion. 'I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till...God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son - and having this witness he honours the Son and the blessed Spirit even as he honours the Father.'⁴²

H. Ray Dunning outlines what might be a 'distinctive Wesleyan approach' to the doctrine of the Trinity, based in part on Wesley's sermon, which if followed would lead to 'taking a different tack from the usual evangelical approach.'⁴³ First, a Wesleyan approach will refuse to insist on any particular explication of the doctrine. This would not mean indifference to orthodox formulations of the Trinity, but the recognition that creedal definitions are important, not because of their positive statements, so much as for their negative rejection of errors.

Second, there will also be a distinction between the substance of the doctrine and its philosophical or theological explication, between the *fact* of the Divine Being as existence in Trinity, and the *manner* of that existence. The Church must inevitably use both philosophical and theological language in its teaching of the doctrine as well as strictly biblical language, but this will always take place in the humility expressed

³⁶ Wesley is aware that the authenticity of the text upon which his sermon is based is open to challenge. He lists Bengelius' reasons for including it, and reminds his readers that its absence from many later manuscripts may have been the result of the Arianizing party under Constantius. *Works* II: 378-9.

³⁷ Outler, 373.

³⁸ Outler, *Works* II: 379-84.

³⁹ Outler, *Works* II: 385.

⁴⁰ Wesley, Semon LV, 'On the Trinity,' in *Works*, VI: 205, cited in Dunning, 232.

⁴¹ Outler, *Works* II: 385.

⁴² Outler, *Works* II: 385.

⁴³ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 209.

in St. Augustine's approach: 'When the question is asked, What three? human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, three 'persons,' not that it might be (completely) spoken, but that it might not be left (wholly) unspoken.'⁴⁴

Third - and here is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Wesleyan approach - there will be the recognition that the substance of the doctrine is not ontological so much as soteriological. In Wesleyan theology, soteriology has a central position, bringing all other doctrines into focus. 'Ultimately, Wesleyan theology asks about the saving significance of every Christian doctrine and resists bringing purely speculative questions into...theology.'⁴⁵ The Triune God is necessarily involved in our salvation in the sense that 'thinking of the Father as Him to whom we are reconciled, is the basis of our acceptance with God (the Son) and the basis of the witness of the Spirit.'⁴⁶

For Athanasius, only if God the Son and God the Spirit share the divinity of God the Father can salvation be experienced by fallen human beings. The grace by which we become partakers of the divine nature is profoundly and necessarily Trinitarian. Similarly, for John Wesley, the direct intuitive experience of the Triune God is the necessary foundation of all Christian experience.

Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection

For John Wesley, salvation was always understood as more than mere forgiveness of sin.

By salvation, I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.⁴⁷

It is well known that Wesley was listening to Martin Luther's *Preface to Romans* when he had his 'heart warming' experience at Aldersgate Street. It is perhaps less widely known that earlier that same day (24 May 1738) he had attended the service at St. Paul's cathedral and read with what he considered a providential illumination, 2 Peter 1:4, '...whereby are given us great and precious promises that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature.' He wrote the verse down in his diary, first in Greek, and only then in Latin. This is perhaps an inconsequential fact. Nonetheless it serves as an interesting metaphor. From the very start of Wesley's evangelical pilgrimage, the Western concern for justification and the Eastern concept of deification were being welded into one harmonious whole.

Wesley drew on the Eastern concept of *theosis* as the organising principle of his *ordo salutis*. There is no such thing for Wesley as an imputed righteousness that is not also

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5:9:10, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1952-1956), cited in Dunning, 211.

⁴⁵ Dunning, 211.

⁴⁶ Dunning, 232.

⁴⁷ John Wesley, 'A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,' *Works* 11:106.

an imparted righteousness, an idea that is similar to Cardinal Bellarmine and the Council of Trent, much to the distress of Wesley's ultra-Protestant opponents. Again, because he is a Western Christian, a Protestant and an Anglican, drawing upon but not confined to the Patristic writers, Wesley's theological system is necessarily eclectic. If I could be forgiven such broad generalisations, and to borrow from Steve McCormick, in Wesley's understanding of salvation, the Christian is pardoned (the Western Latin concern), in order to participate (the Eastern Greek concern), with the result being a 'faith filled with the energy of love' (the Wesleyan synthesis of the two concerns).⁴⁸

Wesley's use of the word 'perfection' caused considerable alarm to his theological opponents. But it was a characteristically Western tendency to understand 'perfection' only in absolute terms, which gave rise to the confusion. For Wesley, the Christian experiences, through grace, a 'perfection' which is always 'being perfected.' In whatever sense 'perfection' may be said to have been 'reached,' it is only and always an approximation of the absolute perfection which awaits the believer in the eschaton. Holiness must be understood in dynamic, relational, and experiential, rather than static, legal, and forensic terms. Absolute perfection lies only in glorification, but a relative perfection is the goal toward which every grace-enabled heart presses. This trajectory is more than God restoring to humanity, through Christ, what has been lost through Adam (though it includes that). Not only does sanctifying grace look back by restoring the soul to its 'primitive health,' it also propels the believer forward to an eschatological destiny in which human life is taken up into the divine life and, along with all creation, transformed.

That which unites Anglicanism, Methodism, and Orthodoxy, across their many lines of difference, is this idea of the co-inherence of the human and the divine.⁴⁹ Outler spoke of Wesley's 'lifelong interest in the patristic ideal of 'divine-human participation' as his 'central theme' and claimed that the 'catholic substance' of Wesley's theology [was] 'the theme of Participation – the idea that all of life is of grace and all grace is the mediation of Christ by the Holy Spirit.'⁵⁰

In Athanasius, through the events of Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection taken together 'the powers of death have done their worst' and been defeated, so that the salvation that flows from these saving events is much more than simply continued existence after death. Immortality is, rather, 'a state so high that in union with the divine Word we are indeed in some sense divine (1 Peter 1:4).'⁵¹

Exactly this idea is sung by Methodists in Charles Wesley's hymn on the Incarnation "Let Earth and Heaven Combine":

⁴⁸ K. Steve McCormack, 'Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern Paradigm of Faith and Love,' in *The Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 26/1 (Spring 1991), 38-103.

⁴⁹ A. M. Allchin, 'The Epworth-Canterbury-Constantinople Axis,' in *The Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 26:1 (Spring 1991): 23-27.

⁵⁰ Albert Cook Outler, ed. *The Sermons of John Wesley*, Vol. 1 in *The Bicentennial Edition [BCE] of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 56, 99. For a review of the idea of 'participation' in the Fathers see David Balas, *Metousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: Herder, 1966); See also Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, eds. *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.)

⁵¹ Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 48.

He deigns in flesh to appear
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine
And we the life of God shall know.
For God is manifest below.

Made perfect first in love,
And sanctified by grace,
We shall from earth remove,
And see His glorious face:
His love shall then be fully showed,
And man shall all be lost in God.⁵²

Conclusion

The Reverend John Wesley and Saint Athanasius were both ‘practical’ theologians in that their theology focused on the living experience of God in Christ through the Spirit. The redemption and transformation of human existence through God’s saving and sanctifying grace lay at the heart of their concern. The profound resonances between the two theologians help us to overcome the perceived incompatibility set forth by Vladimir Lossky at the beginning of this paper. Is it really the case that the Eastern and Western traditions are ‘alternative Christian worldviews, each in its own way internally consistent even if not fully compatible with the other’?⁵³ Certainly each tradition must accept the internal logic of the other, first seeking to understand the other’s point of view before venturing to point out ‘errors’ or inconsistencies. If this is what lies behind Lossky’s observation, then the point is well taken. However this comparative study has attempted to demonstrate commonalities, choosing to indicate closeness rather than distance between the two traditions.

Saint Athanasius was an Orthodox priest and bishop who drew on the high intellectual culture of fourth century Alexandrian Christianity. John Wesley was an eclectic theologian with a love for the Fathers, a man ‘of reason and religion’ in eighteenth century Anglicanism. Both theologians (blessed be their memory) were holy servants of God whose Trinitarian soteriology was grounded in the Incarnation and pointed toward the divinisation of humanity, understood not as the annihilation of the human person, but as the fullness of divine grace actualised in human experience and in all creation. Such a foundation provides a rich resource for the practice of ecumenical theology in our present context.

⁵² Charles Wesley, ‘Let Earth and Heaven Combine,’ from *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord* (London: Strahan, 1745) in George Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*. vol. 4 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 109-110.

⁵³ Cited in Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 17.