

WESLEYAN ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

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This article has been peer reviewed

Wesleyans believe the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated and manifests itself currently through the Church in varying degrees so that eschatology has implications for the present life. With this theological framework as an underlying assumption, this article attempts to identify distinctive Wesleyan eschatological themes running consistently through the history of Methodism relevant to inter-religious relationships: the centrality of Christ, the renewal of the created order, the renewal of the full image of God in humanity, the dynamic nature of the eschaton, and an optimism for 'God fearers and workers of righteousness.' It then explores how these themes should influence a Wesleyan engagement with other religions: through genuine openness to relationships of mutual love and learning, through faithful witness to the saving and sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ, and through joint collaboration in the stewardship of creation and in the promotion of human eudaimonia.

Introduction

Eschatology as Christian doctrine seeks to express the Church's understanding of final events in the present age; the consummation of the created order when God will be 'all in all'; and how eschatology impacts contemporary life and reality. While some Wesleyan theologians have been reticent to address the subject, or reluctant to speculate on particular issues surrounding Christ's second coming and millennial reign, there has been a consistent articulation of a Wesleyan vision of the 'life everlasting' since the eighteenth-century Methodist revival, with provisional implications drawn for the present age.¹ Because John Wesley and his theological

¹ John B. Cobb in *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) does not address eschatology; H. Ray Dunning in *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon

heirs believed 'first evidences' of the 'age to come' were being expressed already in the lives of Christians, adjectives like 'realized,' 'anticipated,' 'inaugurated,' and 'processive' are used to describe their eschatology.²

The purpose of my paper is twofold: (1) to identify key features of this historic Wesleyan eschatological vision relevant for Christianity's engagement with different religions and (2) to explore their implications within the larger framework of the Church's openness, dialogue and witness, and collaboration with other faiths.

In the last twenty years there has been a renaissance among Wesleyan scholars attempting to connect Wesleyan 'New Creation' eschatology with contemporary issues: ecclesial, social, economic, ecological, and inter-religious.³ Unfortunately, the work done on Christianity's relationship with other religions, while helpful, has been limited in scope; usually restricted to the applicability of John Wesley's eschatological views; to the contributions other religions make to Wesleyan eschatology; to common conceptions of heaven, to inter-religious cooperation; or to the fate of people in final judgment who have never heard the Gospel.⁴

Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 569-89 relegates the bulk of his discussion on eschatology to an appendix. See Timothy L. Smith's *Called unto Holiness*, vol. 1, *The Story of the Nazarenes: The Formative Years* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962), 35, 127, for a discussion of Wesleyans who affirmed the major points of eschatology, but refused to engage in 'divisive themes' over unsettled issues regarding Christ's millennial reign. Among theologians who have explored the implications of a Wesleyan eschatology for the present age, most notable is Theodore Runyon's *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); see also Randy Maddox's development of personal, social and ecological ethics out of Wesley's eschatology in his work, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 242-47.

² See Jerry Mercer, 'The Destiny of Man in John Wesley's Eschatology,' in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 2:1 (1967): 58-59; James Cecil Logan, 'Toward a Wesleyan Social Ethic,' in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1985), 363; and Clarence Bence, 'Processive Eschatology: A Wesleyan Alternative,' in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 14:1 (1979): 45-59.

³ See the plenary lectures from the Eleventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies edited by M. Douglas Meeks and published in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2004). These lectures explore the implications of Wesley's 'New Creation' eschatology from different theological disciplines for a full range of contemporary issues.

⁴ For examples of these types of Wesleyan eschatological work, see Jong Chun Park, 'Christian Perfection and Confucian Sage Learning: An Interreligious Dialogue in the Crisis of Life,' in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, 119-48; Joe Gorman, 'Grace Abounds: The Missiological Implications of John Wesley's Inclusive Theology of Other Religions,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48:1 (2013): 38-53; Michael Hurley, 'Salvation Today and Wesley Today,' in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian*

This article attempts to make a modest contribution to Wesleyan reflection by identifying the major eschatological themes relevant to interreligious relationships; by going beyond a simple appeal to John Wesley's teaching on these subjects, tracing a distinctive and clear eschatological perspective running through many of the major theologians in Methodist history; and by helping consolidate, through an eschatological lens, the central points made by Wesleyan scholars regarding the Church's relationship with other faiths.⁵

I. A Wesleyan View of Eschatology Relevant to Christianity's Engagement with Other Religions

While there are differences in eschatological understanding among major theologians in the Methodist tradition, certain fundamental ideas germane to Christianity's engagement with other religions can be traced historically, originating in the eighteenth century and

Tradition, ed., K. A. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 94-116; Randy L. Maddox, 'Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 7-29; Runyon's *The New Creation*, 215-221; Godwin R. Singh, 'New Creation in the Contexts of Religious Pluralism and the Wesleyan Critique' at <http://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/2002-5-singh.pdf>.
⁵ In a survey of the most important contributions of Wesleyan theology from the last twenty-five years on this subject, limitations in scope are apparent. First, there are treatments limited to one or two major eschatological areas, but which lack a more comprehensive eschatological approach. For examples see Eric Manchester, 'Why is Evangelism Important if One Can Be Saved without the Gospel?,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37:1 (2002): 158-70; Philip R. Meadows, 'Candidates for Heaven: Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35:1 (2000): 99-129; and Singh, 'New Creation in the Contexts of Religious Pluralism and the Wesleyan Critique.' Second, there are studies limited to the theology of John Wesley. For examples see Gorman, 'Grace Abounds: The Missiological Implications of John Wesley's Inclusive Theology of Other Religions,' 38-53; Maddox, 'Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,' 7-29; and Frank Whaling, 'Wesley's Premonitions of Inter-Faith Discourse,' in *Pure Universal Love: Reflections on the Wesleys and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Tim Macquiban (Westminster Wesley Series No. 3, Summer 1995), 17. Finally, there are Wesleyan reflections on interfaith relationships that enter into dialogue with other Wesleyan scholars on the subject, but attempt no correlation or organization of these contributions under eschatology. For examples see Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 145-54; Floyd T. Cunningham, 'Interreligious Dialogue: A Wesleyan Holiness Perspective,' in S. Mark Heim, *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 188-207; Thorsen, 'Jesus, Ecumenism, and Interfaith Relations,' 59-71; and Amos Yong, 'A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way? The Wesleyan Witness in a Pluralistic World,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48:1 (2013): 7-27.

culminating in the present: from early Methodists: John Wesley, John Fletcher, and Richard Watson; nineteenth and early twentieth-century Wesleyans: John Miley, William Burt Pope, and Thomas Ralston; and twentieth and twenty-first century Nazarene and Methodist theologians: A.M. Hills, H. Orton Wiley, Kenneth Grider, Thomas Oden and Randy Maddox.⁶

Specifically, there are six eschatological themes consistently held in the Wesleyan tradition relevant to Christianity's relationship with other religions: (a) the centrality of Jesus Christ in the eschaton (b) the renewal of the created order, (c) the renewal of the full divine image in humanity, (d) the dynamic nature of the eschaton, (e) divine judgment and (f) optimism for 'God fearers and workers of righteousness.'

a. The Centrality of Jesus Christ

Because the Wesleyan tradition as a whole has embraced historic orthodox Christology, as represented in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the centrality of Christ to eschatology is clear.⁷ Certainly,

⁶ Central to my task is the identification of certain fundamental ideas about the eschaton running throughout the history of the Wesleyan tradition. To do so, I draw upon the works of early Methodists: John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; Reprint by Baker Book House, 1978), and *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976-); John Fletcher, *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Fletcher* (London: Partridge and Oakley, 1835); and Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889), and *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856); from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880); John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1894); and Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, ed. T. O. Summers (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1924); and from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: A.M. Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology: A Systematic Theology* (Pasadena, CA: C. J. Kinne, Pasadena College, 1931); H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1943); Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994); Maddox, *Responsible Grace*; and Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009). I will also draw upon the work of other theologians including Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), and H. Ray Dunning's *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988). While there are obvious limitations to this approach, the attempt is to show the relevance of these elements of a Wesleyan eschatology, consistently held throughout Methodist history, to inter-religious engagement.

⁷ For an example of the typical affirmation of historic Christology in the Wesleyan tradition, see *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville,

there have been Methodist theologians who have challenged traditional Christology, but their appeal has been limited.⁸ Wesleyan theology has consistently rejected any form of pluralism, conceiving of no redemption and final salvation apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁹

Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, one in nature with the Father, but distinguishable in person, who assumed full human nature in the incarnation to redeem humanity and the created order from all forms of sin and evil. He is the theandric one: fully divine and fully human.¹⁰ Through his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation he inaugurates the work of recreation in the present age and will consummate it in the coming eschaton. Christ is key to the eschaton: he will come again in his humanity to usher in the 'Kingdom of Glory;' the general resurrection from the dead is made possible by and is patterned after his physical resurrection; he presides over the 'great assize' of every human being in the final judgment; and he makes possible in heaven 'an intimate, and uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-in-One God, and all the creatures in him.'¹¹

TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 102-4, particularly Articles of Religion I-III and Confession of Faith, Articles II and XII.

⁸ A recent example is retired United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague's *Affirmations of a Dissenter* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).

⁹ Here I am working with the standard categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as popularized by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

¹⁰ For a helpful overview of the official doctrinal statements on Christology among the diversity of Wesleyan denominations, see Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis & Taylor Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 132-36, 142-44, 156-58, 159-61, 163-72.

¹¹ The quote is taken from John Wesley, Sermon 64, 'The New Creation,' § 18 in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 510. The centrality of Christ in these eschatological categories can be seen in John Wesley, Sermon 15, 'The Great Assize,' *Works*, 1: 354-75; Sermon 51, 'The Good Steward,' *Works*, 2: 282-98; Sermon 64, 'The New Creation,' *Works*, 2: 500-510; Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 438-39, 445-46, 521-27, 554-56, 820-22; Pope, *Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 367-454; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 430-80; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 473-544; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology: A Systematic Theology*, II: 337-431; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 211-392; Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 529-52; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 767-840; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 247-56. For the purpose of this study, I will cite theologians in their chronological order.

b. Renewal of the Created Order

In contrast to any form of Gnosticism infecting Christian eschatology, a Wesleyan view of the 'life everlasting' teaches that God does not destroy fallen creation. Because of the 'goodness' of creation and divine love, God renews and perfects it. Humanity's full nature ('body and soul'), the diversity of natures in the created order, and the entire universe will be redeemed from all forms of corruption and brought to their ultimate end: union with God.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley inherited from his Anglican tradition a form of medieval eschatology focused on a 'spiritual' view of heaven. At death Christians are immediately ushered into a transcendent reality free of the physical world, obscuring traditional teaching of an intermediate state, bodily resurrection at Christ's second coming, and a new heavens and earth.¹² However, Wesley rejected this model and shifted focus. He recognised a conscious intermediate state at death for humanity, in which there is separation from the body, but this is only temporary and anticipatory of ultimate glory.¹³ At Christ's second coming, the intermediate state of death will cease. The dead will be reunited with their bodies, now transformed and suited for their respective destinies through bodily resurrection.¹⁴ After final judgment, the entire created order will be transformed and made incorruptible for 'life everlasting,' no longer subject to disease, decay and death. This change is not a change in nature, but in 'qualities,' encompassing plants, animals, and the geo-physical activity of the world.¹⁵

Wesley's theological heirs generally followed in his same tracks, recognizing the place of human nature and the entire created order in the eschaton. Regarding humanity, they are keenly aware of the necessity of the human body to human nature. The human body is honoured.¹⁶ Without bodily resurrection, even though persons have

¹² Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 231-35. Here, Maddox is reliant upon Colleen McDannell and Bernard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹³ Wesley, Sermon 132, 'On Faith,' *Works*, 4: 188-200.

¹⁴ Benjamin Calamy, 'The Resurrection of the Dead,' ed. John Wesley in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, VII: 474-85.

¹⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 64, 'The New Creation,' 2: 500-510. See Maddox's discussion of Wesley's vision of animals in the 'new creation' in *Responsible Grace*, 246-47, 253.

¹⁶ Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 820-21; Pope, *Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 405-8; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 496-98; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 325-26; and Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 791.

conscious existence in an intermediate state, they are incomplete.¹⁷ Following the pattern of Christ's resurrection, a person's resurrected body is identical with the one that died, although with a change in its properties; it will not be a different body, but a different form of the same body. The resurrected body of the righteous will be perfectly suited for the 'new creation,' able to participate fully in creation and enjoy union with God and fellow humanity.¹⁸ It will be 'consummately radiant, agile, fine, and not subject to suffering,' reflecting the glory of God.¹⁹

Regarding the created order, Wesley's heirs by and large made the connection between humanity's bodily resurrection and the necessity of a physical world in which to live.²⁰ Christ's bodily resurrection anticipates the future of all created existence, when God will transform the world and be 'all in all.' Jesus' glorified body is the sign of creation's future. More specifically, humanity's resurrected bodies must have a physical order in which to live. Humanity is inseparable from the created world. As creation has shared in humanity's corruption and 'fall' in the Garden, it will participate in the full work of God's redemption, in the glorified and incorruptible state of resurrection.²¹ While few have addressed the full ramifications of the 'new creation' in regard to animal and plant life, their theology certainly sets the foundation for such reflection. Indeed, Wesleyans more recently have begun to press the ramifications of the 'new heavens and earth' for animal and plant life.²²

¹⁷ Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 430-32; Pope, *Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 406, 452; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 504-5; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 235, 327-32; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 784-85; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 248-50.

¹⁸ Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 822; Pope, *Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 406-8; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 453; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 408-9; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 325-38; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 794-95.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas as quoted by Oden in *Classic Christianity*, 794.

²⁰ Pope, *Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 447-48; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 472-73; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 388; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 820-21.

²¹ See the sources in the previous footnote and Christopher T. Bounds, 'God's Ongoing Redemption of All Creation,' in *Creation Care: Christian Voices on God, Humanity, and the Environment*, ed. Joseph Coleson (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2010), 40-57.

²² Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation,' 43-45; Runyon, *The New Creation*, 200-206.

c. Renewal of the Full Divine Image in Humanity

If renewal of the created order is about the redemption of creation's diverse natures, the full restoration of the *imago dei* speaks to the reclamation of the human person. The former addresses humanity's 'body and soul'. The latter treats human personhood. Both have prominent places in Wesleyan eschatology. Like other Protestant traditions, Wesleyan eschatology affirms the full restoration of the divine image in humanity, but what sets the Wesleyan perspective apart is the degree to which it can happen in the present life.

John Wesley believed humanity reflects the image of God in three ways: moral, natural and political.²³ The moral image enables humanity to enjoy true righteousness, holiness, love, and knowledge of God through the immediacy of a relationship with God. The moral image forms the guiding principle of humanity's disposition, thoughts, words and deeds. The natural image endows humanity with immortality, rationality, understanding, free will, and perfectly ordered affections.²⁴ The political image gives humanity the power of governance, whereby it exercises dominion in the created order and relates appropriately to God and neighbour.²⁵ Before the Fall, holiness, righteousness and love informed humanity's reasoning, understanding, will and affections, resulting in the wise exercise of stewardship in the created order, rightly ordered relationships with fellow humanity, and perfect love and obedience to God.

However, as a result of original sin, the moral image was destroyed and the natural and political extensively marred.²⁶ Wesley believed that through participating in 'God's eschatological work' in the present life, the moral image would be completely restored and progress could be made in the renewal of the natural and political.²⁷ This is Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. Ultimately, what is

²³ Wesley, Sermon 45, 'The New Birth,' I.1, *Works*, 2: 188.

²⁴ Wesley, 'The New Birth,' I.1, *Works*, 2: 188; Wesley, Sermon 62, 'The End of Christ's Coming,' I.3-7, *Works*, 2:474-76.

²⁵ Wesley, 'The New Birth,' I.1, *Works*, 2: 188.

²⁶ Wesley, 'The New Birth,' I.1, *Works*, 2: 188; I.2-3, *Works*, 2: 189-90; Sermon 62, 'The End of Christ's Coming,' I.10, *Works*, 2: 477. Also see John Wesley, Sermon 141, 'The Image of God,' *Works*, 4: 290-300.

²⁷ Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation,' 29; Wesley, Sermon 77, 'Spiritual Worship,' II.6, *Works*, 3: 96; Sermon 62, 'The End of Christ's Coming,' III.1-6, *Works*, 2: 480-84; Sermon 76, 'Christian Perfection,' *Works*, 3: 70-87; Sermon 141, 'The Image of God,' III.1-3, *Works*, 4: 299-300.

left undone in God's restoration of the *imago dei* culminates in glorification and the full image is made incorruptible.²⁸

While not all of Wesley's theological heirs appropriate his moral, natural and political paradigm, they do describe in similar ways the divine image in humanity, its ruin through sin, and its restoration through Christian perfection in the present life and glorification in the eschaton.²⁹ The image of God entails: holiness and love; rationality, understanding, judgment, affection, and will; and relationships of love.³⁰ What was lost of holiness and love in the divine image through the fall is recovered through Christian perfection in this life and made incorruptible in the eschaton.³¹ This enables believers to walk in loving obedience to God and service to neighbour. While there can be progress presently in rationality, understanding, and judgment, these will not be fully renewed and made perfect until glorification.³² Therefore Christians may be able to live a life motivated and empowered by holy love, but be subject to mistakes, misunderstandings, and errors in judgment until final restoration. Through the full renewal of the image of God, all forms of separation and alienation in every sphere of human relationships will exist no more.

d. The Dynamic Nature of the Eschaton

With the full renewal of human nature and the *imago dei* through Jesus Christ, humanity is equipped for dynamic growth and

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 76, 'Christian Perfection,' I.1-3, *Works*, 3: 72-74; Sermon 40, 'Christian Perfection,' I.1-9, *Works*, 2: 100-105.

²⁹ For examples of those who follow Wesley's basic paradigm, see Watson, *Theological Institutes*, II: 8-18; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, I: 424-28; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, II: 32-39; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 68-72; and Runyon, *The New Creation*, 14-19.

³⁰ Watson, *Theological Institutes*, II: 8-18; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, I: 424-28; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, I: 406-14; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 98-102; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, I: 330-32; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, II: 32-39; Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 236-47; Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 278-83; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 68-72.

³¹ Watson, *Theological Institutes*, II: 450-68; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 44-61; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 356-82; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 457-72; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 222-50; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, II: 440-517; Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 267-420; Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 478-504; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 176-90.

³² Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 439; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 450-54; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 473-75; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 538-42; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 411-14; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 380-85; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 794, 824-26, 836-39.

activity in the ‘new creation.’ A Wesleyan eschatological vision navigates well between two Christian extremes: an ‘anthropocentric’ view focusing on heaven as an idealized picture of human life as presently known, with God receding to the background, and a ‘theocentric’ understanding emphasizing contemplation and rest in the beatific vision of God, with God being fully known and human society fading in the light of divine glory.³³ A Wesleyan eschatology sees the righteous growing in their love of God and each other, as well as in their knowledge and understanding of God and creation. While there is ‘rest’ in heaven, there is also perpetual increase and activity.

John Wesley believed that when Christians die they are ushered directly into ‘paradise,’ the intermediate state of the righteous, the ‘ante-chamber’ of heaven,’ waiting for the day of resurrection. There, their ‘physical’ senses of sight and hearing are heightened; memory and understanding are freed from the limitations of the fallen world; will and affections are made incorruptible; new senses are given to perceive the imperceptible in the created order; and growth in knowledge and love occurs in the presence of God.³⁴ Christians enjoy the ‘intermediate’ expressions of their full destiny.³⁵ As growth in love and holiness do not happen apart from community in present life so the eschatological ‘communion of saints’ continues its role.³⁶ After the general resurrection, final judgment, and the ‘new creation,’ human destiny is fully expressed in ‘an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God...a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God and all the creatures in him,’ where ongoing growth takes place in the knowledge and love of God, humanity and the created order. Humanity’s physical, intellectual, rational, social and spiritual abilities transcend what was ever experienced in Adamic perfection and are directed to God, others, and creation.³⁷

³³ McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 88-93, 177-80, 303-6.

³⁴ Wesley, Sermon 51, ‘The Good Steward,’ II.6-8, *Works*, 2: 288-90; Sermon 132, ‘On Faith,’ *Works*, 4: 187-200.

³⁵ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 249.

³⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 249. One of Wesley’s most famous quotes in his ‘Preface’ to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* 1739 in *The Works of Wesley* (Jackson), 14: 321 makes this clear, ‘Directly opposite to this is the Gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found here. “Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. *The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.*’

³⁷ Wesley, Sermon 64, ‘The New Creation,’ 18, *Works*, 2: 510; ‘Farther thoughts upon Christian Perfection, Q. 29,’ ed. Thomas Jackson, *The Works of John Wesley*, 11: 426;

Wesley's dynamic eschatological view of ever increasing degrees of glory in the intermediate state and in the 'new creation' is embraced for the most part by the historic Methodist tradition that follows.³⁸ With all impediments of sin and corruption removed, with the created order transformed into an incorruptible state exceeding original creation, with humanity renewed in the *imago dei* and fully in the likeness of Christ, humanity is set free for an eternal life of growth in the infinite love of God, in mutual love and service to one another, and the care of creation. What begins in the present life, a participation in the life of God shared in 'communion of saints' in the created order, intensifies in the intermediate state, and is experienced in ever increasing 'full measure' in the 'life everlasting.'³⁹

e. Divine Judgment

The dynamic nature of the eschaton is seen also in a Wesleyan understanding of divine judgment. Wesley and his theological successors believed each human being's eternal trajectory is set at death by their placement in the intermediate state for the righteous or unrighteous.⁴⁰ This is no second 'probationary' period. As addressed previously, the saints in paradise will be 'continually ripening for heaven...perpetually holier and happier,' while the unrighteous carry on in their recalcitrant spirit.⁴¹

However, a Wesleyan eschatology places emphasis on final judgment when Christ returns in glory and the dead are bodily resurrected. People will stand individually before Christ and give an

See Maddox's discussion of Wesley's commendation of Charles' Bonnet's *Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness in Responsible Grace*, 253.

³⁸ Just as there are debates over the nature of the intermediate state in larger Christianity, there are debates over this state in Wesleyan theological circles, both presently and historically. The larger issue here is the basic Wesleyan understanding of the dynamic nature of the eschatological state. Here, the Wesleyan tradition speaks with great uniformity in regard to the eschatological heaven.

³⁹ Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary*, 438-39; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 384; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 430-40, 473-75; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 532-43; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 376-85, 411-14; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 237-40, 375-86; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 249-50, 252-53.

⁴⁰ Wesley, Sermon 51, 'The Good Steward,' III.1, *Works*, 2: 292-93; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 376; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 430-31; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 376-78; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 234-42; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 782-86.

⁴¹ Wesley, Sermon 132, 'On Faith,' 5, *Works*, 4: 191.

account of their lives: outward actions and words; and inward thoughts, desires, inclinations, and intentions.⁴² They will be judged according to their stewardship of gifts and receptivity to the measure of light and truth given to them. Those who never heard the Gospel will be evaluated according to 'the law of their own nature, their conscience guided by their reason, and the law written in their hearts;' Jews will be assessed by the Law of Moses; and Christians will be judged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Final pronouncement will be based on their responsiveness to God's grace in faith.⁴³

The righteous will be rewarded in the new creation in proportion to their active response to grace, in their faith becoming active in love through works of mercy. Therefore the saints will reflect the divine goodness in the 'life everlasting' in a different and individuated way.⁴⁴ 'Though each individual shares in the same salvation, the refracted glory will not be monotone, but varied.'⁴⁵ The unrighteous will receive their due punishment in hell based on their sin in the present life. Just as there are different rewards in glory for the saints, there are different punishments in hell for the unrighteous.⁴⁶

A Wesleyan eschatology has historically rejected any form of universalism, annihilationism and predestination to damnation. While the exact nature of hell is unclear, it is a spiritual state and physical place existing in alienation from God. It is for those who freely have chosen to resist and reject God's overtures of grace, whether through conscience, the Mosaic law or the Gospel. God ultimately respects and honors humanity's refusal to cooperate with divine grace. 'While this possibility is truly grievous, the alternative would ultimately involve either irresistible or indiscriminate salvation, both of which are contradictory to a God of responsible grace.'⁴⁷

⁴² Wesley, Sermon 15, 'The Great Assize,' II: 2-6, *Works*, 1:360-63; Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 418-19; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 461-69; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 402-3; Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 320-21; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 816-19.

⁴³ Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 416-18; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II: 436-37; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 515; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 403-4; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 345-48; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 818.

⁴⁴ Watson, *A Biblical Dictionary*, 554-56; Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 515; Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology*, II: 404; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, III: 351; Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 548; Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 838.

⁴⁵ Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 838.

⁴⁶ Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 545-6.

⁴⁷ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 251.

f. Optimism for ‘God Fearers and Workers of Righteousness’

A Wesleyan eschatological view expresses hope that there will be people in heaven who never professed faith in Christ in the present life. In contrast to the exclusive ‘restrictivist’ understanding as seen in the Augustinian-Tridentine Catholic tradition, there is a strong sense of optimism that all who ‘fear God and work righteousness’ according to the grace given them will be ‘accepted of Him’ through Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ In contrast to Reformed doctrines of predestination and common grace, a Wesleyan eschatology believes that God’s prevenient grace given to all, made available through Jesus Christ’s atoning work, makes salvation possible for all.⁴⁹ Undergirding Wesleyan hope is belief in the unlimited atonement of Christ, confidence that ‘God wills that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth,’ (1 Timothy 2:4) and that judgment shall be according to the light given.

This optimism originates in John Wesley, who increasingly expressed such hope as he aged.⁵⁰ First, Wesley refused to make judgments about the eternal destinies of people from other religions. Regarding Jews, he stated that Christians should ‘leave their fate in the hands of God;’ about Muslims, he believed some had come to ‘true religion’ through prevenient grace; and he praised the response other religions had made to the ‘light’ given them.⁵¹ Second, Wesley began to see the possibility that people who were not Christians might have ‘saving faith’ in an ‘infant state,’ enabling ‘everyone that possesses it to ‘fear God and work righteousness.’⁵² Finally, Wesley believed God will be ‘rich in mercy’ to the ‘heathen’ who ‘call upon him ‘according to the light they have,’ and they will be ‘accepted’ by God in final judgment if they walk in that grace.⁵³

⁴⁸ Thomas A. Noble, ‘Only Exclusivism Will Do: Gavin D’Costa’s Change of Mind,’ *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48:1 (2013): 71.

⁴⁹ Noble, ‘Only Exclusivism Will Do,’ 71.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that not all Wesleyans or contemporary interpreters of Wesley read Wesley in as inclusive light as I do here. See Donald Thorsen, ‘Jesus, Ecumenism, and Interfaith Relations: A Wesleyan Perspective,’ in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47: 1 (Spring, 2012): 69, and Stan Rodes, ‘Was John Wesley Arguing for Prevenient Grace as Regenerative?,’ *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48: 1 (2013): 73-85.

⁵¹ Wesley, Sermon 130, ‘On Living without God,’ 14, *Works*, 4:174.

⁵² Wesley, Sermon 106, ‘On Faith,’ 10, *Works*, 3:497.

⁵³ Wesley, Sermon 91, ‘On Charity,’ I.3, *Works*, 3: 295-96. For more detailed discussion of Wesley’s views, see Maddox, ‘Wesley and the Question of Truth or

Wesley's theological heirs generally followed him on this point to varying degrees. John Fletcher recognised that humanity in every age and place has been given varying 'dispensations' of divine grace by which they can be saved.⁵⁴ Through prevenient grace every person can 'cease to do evil, learn to do well, and use the means which will infallibly end in the repentance and faith peculiar to the dispensation they are under, whether it be that of Heathens, Jews, or Christians.'⁵⁵ William Burt Pope repeatedly affirmed the necessity of refraining from judgment on the eternal destinies of people from other religions and of people who have never heard the Gospel. Judgment must be reserved to God alone.⁵⁶ However, he articulates the nature by which all will be judged: 'as there is none other Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved, all who are not saved must reject that Name in some way revealed to them.'⁵⁷ Richard Ralston taught that everyone has a dispensation of divine grace and even those without the Gospel can live by the Holy Spirit according to the light given them and be saved from 'inevitable destruction.'⁵⁸ Thomas Oden has argued that everyone has been given grace to 'enable each to respond rightly to whatever opportunities are made possible,' and to develop at least 'nascent faith' such as 'the Letter to the Hebrews ascribes to Abel,' and be saved in the end.⁵⁹

Perhaps, Kenneth Collins has stated the Wesleyan belief here concisely, 'That is, in each instance, in the past as in a future reign, the children of Adam and Eve, at any step along the way of salvation history, are given sufficient, even if differing, grace for their needs.'⁶⁰ Even without the Gospel and the Church, humanity has available grace capable of leading to salvation.⁶¹ There is a strong optimism in the Wesleyan tradition that there will be some people in heaven who never formally professed Christ in the present life.

Salvation through Other Religions,' 7-29, and Philip R. Meadows, 'Candidates for Heaven: Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions,' 99-129.

⁵⁴ Fletcher, 'Third Check to Antinomianism,' *Works of Fletcher*, I: 80-85.

⁵⁵ Fletcher, 'Third Check to Antinomianism,' I: 80.

⁵⁶ Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 385-86.

⁵⁷ Pope, *Christian Compendium*, III: 386.

⁵⁸ Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 336, 515.

⁵⁹ Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 737-38, 826.

⁶⁰ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 315.

⁶¹ The real issue is whether people truly cooperate with the grace made available to them.

II. Implications of a Wesleyan Eschatology for the Church's Engagement with Other Religions

In 2005 the World Council of Churches released a paper on *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* that expresses well an ecclesiology resonating with much of the Wesleyan tradition. The Church is a sign of the eschaton, 'pointing beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God;' it is also an instrument through which 'God's reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation is already taking place;' as it participates presently in the life and love of God in anticipation of the 'glory to come.'⁶²

Given this nature of the Church, what are the possibilities of a Wesleyan vision of the eschaton for the Church's engagement with other religions? While Wesleyan scholars in the last twenty years have given fruitful thought to interreligious relationships, they have lacked a comprehensive theological lens through which to consolidate their contributions. A historic Wesleyan eschatology centered on the six themes discussed in the last section can provide a framework in which to do so. Wesleyan theological reflection on the Church's engagement with other religions has focused in three areas and can be grounded appropriately in its eschatology: (a) openness to people of other religions, (b) dialogue and witness about salvation in Jesus Christ, and (c) joint collaboration in the stewardship of creation and in the promotion of human eudaimonia.⁶³

⁶² *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2005), 11.

⁶³ In the last twenty years the most important Wesleyan reflections on interfaith relationships include Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 145-54; Cunningham, 'Interreligious Dialogue: A Wesleyan Holiness Perspective,' 188-207; Gorman, 'Grace Abounds,' 38-53; Maddox, 'Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,' 7-29; Manchester, 'Why is Evangelism Important if One Can Be Saved without the Gospel?,' 158-70; Meadows, 'Candidates for Heaven: Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions,' 99-129; Thorsen, 'Jesus, Ecumenism, and Interfaith Relations,' 59-71; Whaling, 'Wesley's Premonitions of Inter-Faith Discourse,' 17; and Yong, 'A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way?: The Wesleyan Witness in a Pluralistic World,' 7-27. While there is overlap and dialogue with other Wesleyans in their contributions, as well as an appropriation of eschatology by some, there has been no attempt to pull their most important contributions together into a coherent whole. This paper attempts to do so under the rubric of a Wesleyan eschatology.

a. Openness to People of Other Religions

A Wesleyan eschatological vision opens the Church to relationships with people of other religions in three primary ways. First, a Wesleyan understanding of final judgment based on the ‘measure of light’ given to people and its optimism for ‘God fearers and workers of righteousness’ predisposes Wesleyans to genuine interreligious friendships without the necessity of conversion to Christianity.

Because of sin and evil, every human being needs redemption and requires God’s saving grace to enter into ‘life everlasting.’ Unlike other forms of Christianity which see the eschaton determined by a divine decree prior to creation, or strictly limited to people who formally profess Christian faith in the present life, a Wesleyan view of the ‘new creation’ takes seriously that Christ died for all; is actively at work in the world drawing people to salvation through the Spirit; and makes grace available so that all are truly ‘candidates for heaven,’ even apart from adequate exposure or formal response to the Gospel.⁶⁴ God’s future ‘kingdom of glory’ is truly open to all in the present.

Amos Yong has described this orientation as the natural tendency for Wesleyans to respond to other religions in a ‘much less “us” versus “them” manner,’ and approach people of other faiths ‘less as representatives of religious labels than as people made in the image of God and existing within the realm of prevenient grace.’⁶⁵ Similarly, Douglas Mills has asserted that Wesleyans bring a unique theological emphasis in inter-religious relationships: recognition that God is ‘very much active’ in the world and that people in other religions ‘have already experienced the love of God in good measure through the activity of the Holy Spirit.’⁶⁶

Some Wesleyans have pressed this truth to the point of universalism; however, the consistent view has been to see all who are responding fully to ‘the light’ given by the Holy Spirit as ‘fellow travelers’ on the way paved by the work of Jesus Christ.⁶⁷ God’s

⁶⁴ ‘Candidates for heaven’ is a phrase taken from Meadows, ‘Candidates for Heaven,’ 99.

⁶⁵ Yong, ‘A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way?’, 9, 11.

⁶⁶ Douglas Mills, ‘A Very Short Theological Basis for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation,’ paper, Commission on Interfaith Relations, New York, 21 February 2009.

⁶⁷ An example of a Wesleyan who holds to universalism is David Lowes Watson, *God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon,

prevenient grace is operative in other religions seeking to lead their followers to Christ whether they fully realise it or not.⁶⁸ As such, this understanding of the eschaton opens the Church to the possibility that in its engagement with sincere people of other religions, the Church develops relationships with people who will be in heaven and provisionally mirrors the eschatological 'communion of saints.'⁶⁹

Second, a Wesleyan understanding of eschatological renewal in the *imago dei* and the dynamic nature of heaven opens the Church to truth, wisdom and grace found in other religions through the Holy Spirit. As Christians develop relationships with people from other faiths, mutual understandings and shared experiences of the created order, human society, and the divine are found.⁷⁰ A Wesleyan approach however will go beyond simple acknowledgment of 'common ground' and recognise that there is much to learn from other religions.

Christians are not and never will be omniscient. Growth in all areas of knowledge characterises humanity's present and future life. The thirst 'to know' is carried from this life into eternity. As the Church engages other faiths, Christians open themselves to new discoveries, adding to their field of knowledge and enabling them to plumb more deeply the reality of existence. Through the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit at work in other faiths, Christians gain new knowledge from their interreligious relationships.

To any knowledge learned, Christians must add greater understanding, wisdom and judgment. While Wesleyans believe the moral image of God can be fully restored in the present age, the natural and political remain marred until glorification after death. Wesleyan eschatology helps the Church understand that in this life it sees 'through a glass darkly.' Even with the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, Christians stand in need of greater light in every area of life. Other religions offer a different set of lenses

1990), 101ff. Some representative Wesleyans who express this type of understanding include Lycurgus Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 43; and Ole Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 126.

⁶⁸ Meadows, 'Candidates for Heaven,' 126.

⁶⁹ See Joe Gorman's discussion of Karl Rahner and the use of the term 'anonymous Christian' from a Wesleyan perspective in 'Grace Abounds: The Missiological Implications of John Wesley's Inclusive Theology of Other Religions,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48:1 (2013): 41-44.

⁷⁰ Amos Yong describes this type of relationship Christians can have with Buddhists in 'A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way?', 11-13.

through which to look at the world, providing chances for new insight, wisdom and ways of seeing a multifaceted reality.

More specifically, through friendships with people of other religions, the Church has opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of its own faith, to have 'blind spots' exposed in its self-understanding and experience of salvation, and to critically appropriate into its life spiritual practices found in other religions. Through openness to learning, edification and growth through interfaith relationships, the Church participates in and mirrors the coming eschaton.

Third, a Wesleyan eschatology provides a clear vision for present human relationships: the complete renewal of the divine image in humanity, enabling mutually reciprocating relationships of self-giving love. Wesleyans believe that by God's grace Christians can be renewed presently in the moral image, making it possible for humanity to participate already in the perfect love of God and neighbour as seen in Heaven.

Christians therefore do not have to 'force themselves' to reach out in self-giving love to their neighbours in other religions. Spirit-infused love compels and empowers this life, even in the most difficult of circumstances. While knowledge and understanding may be lacking, motivation and intention must not. Christians are enabled to work toward reconciliation and fellowship in interfaith relationships, overcoming obstacles the fallen world thrusts in the way.

However, perfected love is not one-sided. While love opens Christians to giving and serving their neighbours in other faiths, it also opens them to the reception of love as well. Holy love makes Christians vulnerable to their neighbours, not just to the possibility of rejection or misunderstanding, but to their neighbours' actions of self-giving love. Perfect love opens Christians to receive in gratitude the love initiated or returned by their neighbours in other religions, reflecting in varying degrees the dynamic, mutually reciprocating relationships of love in the eschatological family of God.

b. Dialogue and Witness about Salvation in Jesus Christ

The Church's conversation with and witness to people of other religions about salvation in Jesus Christ flows from the Church's openness to relationships. Foundational for Wesleyans here is personal holiness of heart and life. Christians must experience and

manifest holy love in their interreligious friendships through personal renewal in the moral image of God. Dialogue and witness therefore is not grounded ultimately in 'right belief' or right information, but in the personal experience of sanctifying grace, establishing Christians in the love of God and neighbour which defines all relationships in heaven.

Wesleyans recognise that one of the strongest witnesses to the truth of Christ is a believer's life defined by holy love. Wesley said that when the Church mirrors the 'kingdom of God,' unbelievers will 'look upon' Christians 'with other eyes and begin to give attention to their words...and the holy lives of Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist.'⁷¹

As Christians enter into friendships defined by holy love with people of other religions, sincere discussion about religious beliefs will naturally arise. While there is fear that sincere dialogue may side-track some Christians down another religious path, it also opens people from other faiths to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷² A Wesleyan eschatology helps provide a theological framework for this type of engagement.

First, while the Church 'appreciates, learns from, and receives something of value' from its interfaith relationships, true openness naturally leads Christians to share about the person and work of Jesus Christ, the end to which all prevenient grace leads and the key to the present and eschatological Kingdom of God.⁷³ In the historic Wesleyan tradition, Christ is an inescapable 'scandal of particularity,' a *sine qua non* in Christian dialogue with and witness to people of other faiths.⁷⁴ Christ truly is Lord and Saviour. However, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is shared in love and humility with others, inviting others to Christian faith rather than driving and compelling them.

Second, while Wesleyans believe people of other religions will be judged by the grace afforded them and have optimism about seeing them in eternity, this does not mean members of other faiths have 'lived up to the light' given them. The gravity of original sin burdens human cooperation with divine grace. Many resist the full measure

⁷¹ Wesley, Sermon 63, 'The General Spread of the Gospel,' 22, *Works*, 2:496. See Joe Gorman, 'Grace Abounds,' 46-48.

⁷² Yong, 'A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way?,' 16.

⁷³ Quote taken from Yong, 'A Heart Strangely Warmed on the Middle Way?,' 13.

⁷⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Praeparatio Evangelii: The Theological Roots of Wesley's View of Evangelism*, ed. James C. Logan, *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 77-78.

of God's prevenient grace required to create a 'fear God and work righteousness' faith, that faith minimally necessary to make people 'accepted of Him.'⁷⁵

Because of the threat of hell and an eternity of separation from the 'communion of saints,' Christians share the Gospel in love. Wesleyans recognise that the grace of Jesus Christ as found in the Gospel is the primary means by which spiritual sloth and the recalcitrance of human hearts are broken, leading to 'fruits worthy of repentance,' faith, and good works. While there is hope that sharing the Gospel results in Christian faith, it may lead some to a deeper devotion to their native religion. In either case a fuller embrace of divine grace has occurred.⁷⁶

Third, the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes possible a greater potential of renewal in the present life of the *imago dei*, enabling greater degrees of holiness of heart and life than what is experienced through prevenient grace alone. 'The Gospel does not add extra content to the task of obedience, but it brings a 'renewing power for the life of obedience' enabling the manifestation of the personal and social character of the eschaton in deeper and fuller ways here on earth.'⁷⁷

A similar idea exists in Roman Catholicism. In the most recent edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* there is recognition that other religions, particularly monotheistic ones, have elements of truth and salvation in them. However, only in the Catholic Church are 'all the means of salvation' found, capable of establishing a person in the fullness of God's revelation, in the fullness of relationship with the Triune God, in the fullness of the 'communion of saints,' and in the fullness of holiness possible in present life.⁷⁸ The Gospel of Jesus Christ as mediated through the Church opens people up to a more robust 'dispensation' of holy living.

Fourth and closely related, as Wesleyans engage in dialogue and witness, it is to aide spiritual progress in the present life, setting the foundation for development in the life to come.⁷⁹ Because of the

⁷⁵ Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 232.

⁷⁶ Manchester, 'Why is Evangelism Important?', 162.

⁷⁷ Maddox, 'Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,' 18.

⁷⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 819, 837.

⁷⁹ See Meadows, 'Candidates for Heaven,' 119-20 and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 251.

dynamic nature of ‘life everlasting,’ a Wesleyan eschatology recognises that there are degrees of glory based on a person’s realisation of holy love in this life. Speaking of those who serve God in ‘low degree,’ Wesley states, ‘they will not have so high a place in heaven as they would have had if they had chosen the better part.’⁸⁰ This understanding permeates Wesley’s theological successors, who see spiritual progress in the present life having implications for people in glory. Christians seek to enhance spiritual formation in holy love through their relationships with people of other religions whether or not they convert to Christianity.

c. Joint Collaboration in the Stewardship of Creation and in the Promotion of Human Eudaimonia

A Wesleyan eschatology eschews any Gnostic tendencies in Christianity. Genesis clearly establishes the value of the entire created order with God’s unequivocal declaration of its goodness. Persons formed as physical beings in the divine image flourish in relationship with God, with creation, and with others. A Wesleyan eschatology reiterates God’s assessment of creation’s goodness through a vision of the world’s redemption and consummation in the future eschaton where humanity, along with the rest of creation, flourishes even more than in the beginning. Even now, the Holy Spirit is at work enabling the world to participate in the ‘new creation’ to some degree through prevenient, saving and sanctifying grace. This Wesleyan eschatological vision informs and empowers the Church as it works with other faiths to further the expression of creation’s renewal and human eudaimonia, while also confronting threats arising from the present order’s fallen nature.

Collaboration here happens on two levels. First, in regard to the created order, as God restores the full divine image in humanity, not just the moral, but the natural and political as well, the work of reconciliation between humanity and creation deepens. The ‘curse’ existing between humanity and the physical world is being lifted through the deepening experience of prevenient and sanctifying grace. Because of the riches of God’s grace in salvation, and the deepening understanding of God’s revelation, the Church and other religions are able to realize the importance to God of the created

⁸⁰ Wesley, Sermon 89, ‘The More Excellent Way,’ I.8, *Works*, 3:266.

order and collaborate in the wise care of it.⁸¹ The Church has a vested role in working together with other faith communities in addressing issues like global warming, renewable energy, ecosystem sustainability, and animal care, not simply for the benefits to humanity, but for the goodness and redemption of creation itself.⁸²

Second, in regard to human eudaimonia in creation, there are particular elements of a Wesleyan eschatological view relevant to collaboration: physical, social, and intellectual. Humanity is an embodied soul. While a Wesleyan eschatology often recognises a conscious existence in an intermediate state, the doctrine of bodily resurrection and 'new creation' show that humanity is not fully human apart from the body. Furthermore, emphasis is given to humanity's present body because it is the body that is resurrected and made incorruptible. There is no human flourishing in present or future life without a healthy body. This understanding of the necessity of the body helps set the foundation for interfaith collaboration in meeting humanity's physical needs: adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, and medicine.⁸³

A Wesleyan view of the eschaton also accentuates the social nature of humanity. Humanity's interpersonal relationships do not fade in a beatific vision of God, but grow and deepen more fully in final union with God. Humanity is made for relationship with other human beings and within these relationships holiness and love intensify. Humanity is incomplete and cannot flourish without other people. The impinging 'new creation' provides grace to overcome what divides, empowering reconciliation between divided parties and supporting stable social conditions necessary for human flourishing. This perspective undergirds collaboration with other faiths to establish healthy, stable human relationships and social structures in today's world.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 52-53; Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation,' 43-49; Runyon, *The New Creation*, 200-207.

⁸² For further discussion, see John Harrod, 'Wesleyan Reflections on Ecology,' in *Windows on Wesley*, ed. Philip Meadows (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), 129-52; Michael Lodahl, 'The Whole Creation Groans: Is There a Distinctively Wesleyan Contribution to the Environmental Ethic?', *CTNS Bulletin* 18:2 (1998): 10-19.

⁸³ See Gorman, 'John Wesley's Inclusive Theology of Religions,' 50-51; Thorson, 'Jesus Ecumenism, and Interfaith Relations,' 63.

⁸⁴ For an excellent discussion of this issue from a larger Christian perspective, see Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).

Finally, a Wesleyan eschatology recognises the intellectual nature of humanity, the thirst to grow in knowledge, wisdom and understanding. In eternity with the perfected natural image, humanity will ever be fathoming the depths of God, exploring the created order, appreciating the beautiful and exercising creativity. Developing the life of the mind and heart is essential to being human. This helps solidify the natural impulses of historic Christianity in the formation of educational institutions, not only as a means to the end of a particular vocation, but as an end unto itself, reflecting in part a Wesleyan vision of the new creation. It is natural for the Church therefore to partner with other religions in the formation of educational institutions where skills necessary for learning and exploration of reality are developed and the acquisition of wisdom takes place.

Conclusion

With the ‘communion of saints,’ Wesleyans pray the Lord’s Prayer, ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ Eschatology has implications for the present life; Wesleyans believe the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated and is made manifest in varying degrees in the present age through the Church. With this theological framework as an underlying assumption, I have attempted to identify distinctively Wesleyan eschatological themes running consistently through the history of Methodism relevant to inter-religious relationships: the centrality of Christ, the renewal of the created order, the renewal of the full image of God in humanity, the dynamic nature of the eschaton, and an optimism for ‘God fearers and workers of righteousness’ in other religions. I have then tried to explore how these themes impinge on a Wesleyan engagement with other religions: through genuine openness to relationships of mutual love and learning, through giving witness to the saving and sanctifying grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in word and personal life, and through working together in the stewardship of the created order and human eudaimonia.