

**WILL THE REAL JOHN WESLEY PLEASE  
STAND UP?:  
A SURVEY OF VARYING INTERPRETATIONS OF  
JOHN WESLEY'S POLITICAL THEOLOGY**

**Gregory R. Coates**

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*This article provides a survey of the differing interpretations of Wesley's political theology offered by scholars in recent years, paying particularly close attention to the work of Leon Hynson, Theodore Jennings, and Theodore Weber. It suggests three crucial distinctions that must be kept clear for any proper interpretation of Wesley's political theology and argues that Wesley's thought informs important contemporary debates over Christian civic engagement.*

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The life and work of John Wesley, father of the eighteenth century Methodist movement in England, left an indelible mark on the history of Christianity, especially in Europe and North America. The impact of the Methodist movement reshaped not only the spiritual, but also the political landscape of England and the United States. Indeed, some have even argued that were it not for the impact of Wesley and the Methodists, England would have been plunged into a bloody revolution similar to that experienced in eighteenth century France.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite its historical significance, the political theology of John Wesley is notoriously difficult to pinpoint. While some scholars have depicted Wesley as a deeply conservative High Church Tory thoroughly committed to king and country, others argue that he was a proto-Marxist liberation theologian.<sup>2</sup> While most scholars espouse an interpretation between these two extremes, this is a debate that will likely continue for decades to come. What are we to

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<sup>1</sup> This theory was first proposed by the French historian Élie Halévy in 1906. For an English translation, see Élie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*. ed and trans. by Bernard Semmel (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> For a conservative interpretation of Wesley's political theology, see Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001) and for a liberationist reading of Wesley, see Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990). Both of these will be examined in greater detail later in this paper.

make of the radically different interpretations of John Wesley's political theology?

### **Interpretations of Wesley's Political Theology**

Throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars depicted John Wesley as a High Church Tory typified by the following four characteristics: 1) commitment to the doctrine of divine right, 2) the conviction that God (rather than the people) chooses kings, 3) the practice of passive obedience to authority, and 4) a profound fear of democratic liberalism as the seedbed for anarchy.<sup>3</sup> Ample evidence in Wesley's letters, sermons, and writings can be cited in support of this view including, most obviously, Wesley's famous statement in 1775, 'I am a High Churchman, the son of a High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance.'<sup>4</sup> As Jason Vickers notes about Wesleyan scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century, 'In what was among the most influential early twentieth-century monographs of Wesley's political philosophy, Maldwyn Edwards' *John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century* begins with the simple and straightforward declaration, "John Wesley was a Tory."<sup>5</sup> Due to the preponderance of evidence in Wesley's writings for this theory, this facile depiction of Wesley as a Tory, articulated by scholars such as Frederick Norwood, Richard Cameron, and William Warren Sweet, remained largely unchallenged until the early 1970s.

In the last forty years, however, scholars have argued for a more nuanced view of Wesley's politics, in some cases citing him as a proto-liberal democrat committed to natural rights. Leon Hynson was among the first to reinterpret Wesley's political convictions in this vein. Hynson argues that Wesley underwent a radical transformation in his political position throughout his life, particularly during a transitionary period between the years 1734 and 1764.<sup>6</sup> In his younger years, Wesley reflected the conservative Tory views of his father, but the late Wesley had greater appreciation for individual human liberty as a God-given right and grew in

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Vickers, *Wesley: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, 'Letter to William Legge' (14 June 1775), in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:156.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Vickers, *Wesley: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Leon O. Hynson, 'Human Liberty as a Divine Right: A Study in the Political Maturation of John Wesley,' *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983): 57-85.

sympathy with democratic movements.<sup>7</sup> As a foundation for his argument, Hynson points to Wesley's increasing willingness to critique his government on issues such as slavery and the plight of the nation's poor, and to advocate for natural rights and human liberty.

Hynson's argument challenged the accepted view by stressing five specific and interrelated points: 1) Wesley wrote as a champion of human liberty; 2) he supported the human regulation of kingly authority inasmuch as he favored a limited constitutional monarchy (as in place in England) over and against an absolute monarchy, 3) he opposed the pre-Glorious Revolution notion of the divine right of kings, 4) he supported the monarchy only insofar as it protected and defended basic human rights, and 5) Wesley's view of the liberty of conscience undercut his early appeals to passive obedience.<sup>8</sup>

Central to Hynson's argument is the conviction that Wesley underwent a significant period of change during the middle years of his life, a thesis later to be built upon by Theodore Weber. In summary, over and against the view that Wesley was purely Tory, Hynson concludes, 'Wesley's central commitment was not to his country, his king, or negatively, his distaste for republican governments, but his dedication to the full liberties of his land, liberties both in church and state, both personal and social.'<sup>9</sup> Here Hynson opens the door for future interpretations of Wesley as a proto-liberal democrat committed to human rights, a thesis quite palatable to American Methodist scholars seeking to recruit the founder of their church as a supporter of modern political values.

In his book *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (published in 1990), Theodore W. Jennings interprets John Wesley as a forerunner to modern liberation theology. Agreeing that Wesley placed strong emphasis on human liberty and natural rights,<sup>10</sup> Jennings builds on Hynson's thesis and radically expands it to depict Wesley as a proto-Marxist. Jennings draws attention to the many sermons and letters Wesley wrote condemning the ownership of private property and instead extolling

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<sup>7</sup> See Leon O. Hynson, 'John Wesley's Concept of Liberty of Conscience,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 36-46; Leon O. Hynson, 'John Wesley and Political Reality,' *Methodist History* 12.1 (1973): 37-42.

<sup>8</sup> Hynson, 'John Wesley and Political Reality,' 38.

<sup>9</sup> Hynson, 'John Wesley and Political Reality,' 41.

<sup>10</sup> Jennings writes, 'For Wesley the question of human rights is the decisive norm for the development of a political ethic.' *Good News for the Poor*, 200.

the early church of Acts 2-4 – including their practice of holding all possessions in common – as exemplary for modern Methodists.

Jennings argues that God's preferential option for the poor takes center stage in Wesley's theology and becomes the litmus test for earnest Christian belief: 'Thus the question of solidarity with the poor was ultimately a question of the authenticity of the Christian's confession of faith.'<sup>11</sup> As for Wesley's defense of the monarchy, Jennings explains that Wesley compromised with the political establishment in order to protect the young and vulnerable Methodist movement from being associated with other anarchist movements. But Jennings contends that Wesley's monarchism never took a central place in his sermons.<sup>12</sup>

It is essential to note that Jennings differs from Hynson in his point of departure. Whereas Hynson is primarily concerned with Wesley's political convictions, Jennings is more interested in what he calls Wesley's 'evangelical economics.' One might say that Hynson reads Wesley's economics in light of his politics, but Jennings reads Wesley's politics in light of his economics. And this is a deliberate interpretive choice on the part of Jennings who argues, 'One of the conditions for a rereading of Wesley in this connection is the move from an emphasis on *political* issues to an emphasis on *economic* issues as significant for the general themes of social ethics.'<sup>13</sup> Jennings explicitly states that this orientation situates his own scholarship within the tradition of liberation theology.

From this starting point, then, Jennings argues that Wesley took a critical stance toward the given economic structures of his day and used both his pen and his pulpit to 'demystify' wealth and power. Wesley became intensely critical of the economics of private property as popularized by the thought of John Locke,<sup>14</sup> and instead

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<sup>11</sup> Jennings, *Good News for the Poor*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Jennings, *Good News for the Poor*, 206-209.

<sup>13</sup> Jennings, *Good News for the Poor*, 19. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Madron notes the points of difference between Wesley and Locke: 'Unlike John Locke, whose ideas dominated much of the eighteenth-century political and economic thought, Wesley refused to elaborate a theory for the absolute protection of property rights... For Locke, property became an inalienable right which must be defended. For Wesley, on the other hand, property was never an inalienable right; any person holds property only as a steward of God.' Thomas W. Madron, 'John Wesley on Economics,' in *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981), 107. For a primary source, see Wesley's sermon 'The Use of Money' in

turned to the early church as an alternative economic model favoring common property. This theological persuasion led Wesley actively to engage in political and structural advocacy in the hope of developing ‘a positive ethic that will alter the given socioeconomic reality’ of his day ‘that breaks the spell of “private property” and leads to a redistribution of wealth whose criterion is the welfare of the poor.’<sup>15</sup>

Jennings and Hynson both view Wesley as limited by the context of his own day. They readily recognize the ways in which Wesley’s politics do not align with modern liberal values. But they highlight elements of his thought that resonate with later developments. As Hynson concludes, ‘From the vantage point of our historical position, some of Wesley’s assumptions and beliefs are seen to be faulty, but his commitment to human liberty is a luminous and penetrating valuation of man.’<sup>16</sup> Jennings would agree, yet push farther, arguing that a modern reading of Wesley will properly situate him as the progenitor of liberation theology.<sup>17</sup>

Reacting to Jennings’ interpretation of Wesley, Theodore R. Weber offered a rejoinder in 2001 in his study *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics*, the most exhaustive and thoroughly researched treatment of Wesley’s political theology to date. Weber describes Wesley as an ‘organic constitutionalist’ for whom loyalty to God, church, and country

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*The Works of John Wesley*. 14 Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 6: 124-136. This source is hereafter referred to as *Works*.

<sup>15</sup> Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Hynson, ‘John Wesley and Political Reality,’ 42.

<sup>17</sup> As Jennings is well aware, a proper emphasis upon Wesley’s interpretation of Scripture is central to any argument favoring the liberationist elements in Wesley’s economics. For Wesley, the holding of common property was not first a concept rooted in political theory (as it would be for Marx years later), but rather a concept taught in Scripture and exemplified among the early disciples. Wesley’s challenge to private property among Christians was rooted in two fundamental theological convictions: First, all property ultimately belongs to God. Therefore, Christians are stewards, not owners, of what they possess. Second, Wesley believed that outward actions always flow from what he called the ‘tempers.’ When Christ transforms the tempers of an individual through the process of sanctification, the natural outworking of perfect love within her heart will necessitate the generous sharing of her property for the benefit of others. Thus, Wesley did not advocate a system of forced redistribution through taxes, but did insist that the holding of common property ought to be the normative practice among all true believers who steward God’s resources properly and whose tempers are transformed by the Holy Spirit. See especially Wesley’s sermons, ‘The Use of Money’ and ‘The Good Steward,’ in *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 6:124-149.

remain inextricably interwoven. In support, Weber quotes Wesley, who wrote in 1747,

Above all, mark that man who talks of loving the Church, and does not love the King. If he does not love the King, he cannot love God. And if he does not love God, he cannot love the Church. He loves the Church and King just alike. For indeed he loves neither one nor the other.<sup>18</sup>

Weber does not fully retreat to the hard line on Wesley's Tory values common among scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, but he does criticize modern scholars for contorting Wesley to fit their own agendas: 'No aggressive investigation, no artful revisionism can overcome the fact that Wesley denied a political role to the people, and that he never wavered from this conviction.'<sup>19</sup> Wesley was, according to Weber, unabashedly anti-democratic and anti-republican due to his unyielding loyalty to monarchism, albeit a limited, constitutional monarchism. In short, Weber accuses scholars of trying to fit Wesley into their own political agenda rather than taking his writings at face value.

In his argument portraying Wesley as an organic constitutionalist, Weber seeks to show that Wesley stands in 'a conservative tradition, but it is not the conservatism of autocracy and absolutism. Rather, it is a tradition that respects established institutions that protect the values of people, while at the same time leaving the way open for change and improvement.'<sup>20</sup> Weber does this by closely examining three crucial moments in the life of John Wesley's political formation: 1) the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, 2) the social upheaval and constitutional crisis caused by John Wilkes and his followers in the 1760s, and 3) the division of the English empire during the American colonial rebellion. In each of these three events, Weber argues, John Wesley defended the established order and sought to distance himself from any perceived or genuine threat to the British king and system of government. Throughout all three of these crisis moments in English history, Wesley 'trumpeted the virtues of the existing system and projected disaster if it were destroyed and replaced; and he attacked the radical (liberal)

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<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, 'A Word to a Freeholder' (1747), in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 11:197-98, quoted in Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 31.

ideology with its arguments for natural rights, popular sovereignty, and social contract.<sup>21</sup>

While Weber faults scholars like Hynson and Jennings for distorting Wesley's actual political position, he does share their desire to redeem Wesley's thought for our contemporary context by articulating a genuinely Wesleyan political theology. In the final chapter of his book, Weber critiques Wesley for failing to connect his political theology to the transformationist elements of his soteriology. Wesley championed the idea of a three-fold image of God in every human being: the natural image, the moral image, and the political image.<sup>22</sup> Yet of the three aspects in this typology, the least developed in Wesley's theology is the political image. Weber suggests that if Wesley were to extrapolate practical theology from his concept of the political image to the same extent that he did of the moral image it would have led him to a deeper appreciation of human liberty and natural rights. In short, Weber argues that the political image of God can serve as a theological foundation for democratic, popular governance over and against the hierarchical top-down model of authority that Wesley inherited and defended. Thus, later Methodists can find lying dormant within Wesley's own soteriology a strong case for the right of all people to govern themselves. This does not necessarily imply an endorsement of a particular form of government, according to Weber, but it does call into question Wesley's own strongly monarchical political persuasion.<sup>23</sup>

From this overview of three scholars – Hynson, Jennings, and Weber – we can surmise that John Wesley was a complex character whose political, social and economic theology is not easily distilled. Now we must turn our attention to what accounts for this wide variety in interpretations.

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<sup>21</sup> Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> According to Wesley's anthropology, each of these three 'images' remained intact subsequent to the fall of mankind. By 'natural image,' Wesley referred to the understanding, free will, and liberty imprinted on every human by the grace of God. By 'moral image,' Wesley meant knowledge of God's moral laws, to which God required perfect obedience. The 'political image' refers to the Adamic relationship with the rest of creation as its steward and caretaker. Barry E. Bryant, 'Original Sin' in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 522-539. See also Wesley's sermon 'Original Sin' in *Works* 6:54-65.

<sup>23</sup> For the full development of this argument, see especially chapter 12, 'Recovering the Political Image of God' in Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 391-420.

## Accounting for the Variations

Why have attempts to interpret the political and social theology of John Wesley generated such starkly divergent interpretations? As we have seen from our survey of the three scholars above, readings of Wesley range from depictions of him as a high church, pro-monarchy Tory to an advocate for democratic and republican values to a proto-Marxist liberation theologian. In this second section of the paper, I will suggest three important distinctions that must be made in order to properly understand Wesley's political theology: 1) the distinction between Wesley's politics and his economics, 2) the distinction between Wesley's message to the Methodists and his message to society at large, and 3) the distinction between the young and the mature Wesley.

First, a strong differentiation needs to be maintained between Wesley's economic views and his political views. Obviously, politics and economics are closely related to one another, but in Wesley's thought this distinction must be made for the sake of clarity. In short, Wesley's economics, rooted in his reading of the New Testament, challenged the emerging capitalist spirit that was increasingly prevalent in his eighteenth-century context. Indeed, at times, Wesley even called the very foundations of capitalism into question. In this sense, then, Wesley harkened back to what Madron calls a form of 'primitive communism.'<sup>24</sup> Taken in the context of his own day, Wesley's economics could, in one sense, be described as conservative or traditionalist since it questioned the basic tenets of the newly emerging capitalist system and championed a return to biblical models of economic life. However, given the hegemony of *laissez faire* free market-based economies in our own day, Wesley's economic theory could now rightly be called prophetically progressive inasmuch as he remained remarkably wary of the dangers inherent in any economic system which prizes individualism and the accumulation of private property above all else.

Wesley's politics, on the other hand, remained committed to conservative Tory values throughout his life. Rooted in the deep conviction that all authority derives from God, Wesley remained suspicious about democratic forms of government and the right of people to choose their own leaders. Since Wesley's politics and economics are so different, therefore, it is crucial for all interpreters

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<sup>24</sup> Madron, 'John Wesley on Economics,' 108. See also footnote #17.



to maintain a clear distinction between the two. Whereas Wesley's politics may leave unsatisfied modern readers committed to liberal democracy and the right of the people for self-governance, his economic theories certainly offer profound and important insights for contemporary politics. To emphasize the importance of this distinction we will briefly take a look at each, beginning with a sketch of Wesley's economic ethics.

Repeatedly throughout his life, Wesley demonstrated his willingness to question radically the economic structures of his day. Randy Maddox offers a helpful summary of Wesley's economic ethics in four concise points:

(1) Ultimately everything belongs to God; (2) resources are placed in our care to use as God sees fit; (3) God desires that we use these resources to meet our necessities (i.e. providing food and shelter for ourselves and dependents), and then to help others in need; thus (4) spending resources on luxuries for ourselves while others remain in need is robbing God!<sup>25</sup>

In the context of eighteenth century England, where the economic thought of Adam Smith and John Locke increasingly impacted both government policies and popular opinion, Wesley promoted a counter-cultural alternative that took the early church as its prototype, and he attempted to recapture the Christian tradition of communality that had largely been lost by the time of the Enlightenment.

The theological foundation of all Wesleyan economics is the concept of stewardship. Since God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists, human beings never actually *own* anything. Rather, humans are entrusted with the property of God to be used for his purposes. Furthermore since the basic law of Christian ethics is to love God and love our neighbors, Wesley believed all excess money must be utilized to promote the common good. Marquardt summarizes the centrality of both the concept of stewardship and the love commandment in Wesley's economic teachings:

According to Wesley, the purpose of earning and thrift is to make life's necessities available to all and to ameliorate or eliminate the distress of others. Doing so fulfills the commandment to love one's neighbor, and above all demonstrates obedience to the will of God, the owner. All

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<sup>25</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 244.

persons must account before their Creator and Judge for what they have done with their money and all other goods entrusted to them and must receive God's reward or punishment.<sup>26</sup>

Given his critique of private property rooted in a theological commitment to the love commandment and the principle of stewardship, Wesley offered harsh words of warning against the accumulation of wealth or expenditure of resources on needless luxuries. This theme appeared more frequently in Wesley's later ministry as he witnessed many Methodists increasing in riches and yet failing to properly steward their money for the use of the common good. Two years before his death, Wesley declared,

The Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they grow rich. Although many of them are still deplorably poor...yet many others, in the space of twenty, thirty, or forty years, are twenty, thirty, or yea a hundred times richer than they were when they first entered the society. And it is an observation which admits of few exceptions, that nine in ten of these decreased in grace in the same proportion as they increased in wealth. Indeed, according to the natural tendency of riches, we cannot expect it to be otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Wesley perceived the gradual accumulation of wealth to be one of the greatest threats to the future of the Methodist movement since it entailed a rejection of both the love commandment and the acknowledgment of God's ownership over all of creation.

Thus, in his economics, Wesley defended the historic Christian values of charity and hospitality, in an age of increasing individualism. He resisted the impulse common among many of his day (and ours) to separate economic theory from the ethics of the Christian life. Vying against the emerging ethos of capitalism, Wesley proved himself willing time and again to shun the economic climate of eighteenth-century England and insist that a profound concern for the common good must take precedence in any proper Christian ethic. This leads Maddox to proclaim, 'While Adam Smith held that surplus accumulation was the foundation of economic well-being, Wesley viewed it as a mortal sin!'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>27</sup> John Wesley, *Works*, 7:289.

<sup>28</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 244-245.

While his stance against the presuppositions and abuses of capitalism set him apart from most of his contemporaries, Wesley's political views, in contrast, were much more mainstream. Eighteenth-century England was deeply divided between the Tories and Whigs.<sup>29</sup> Given this reality, Wesley sided with the Tories, vigorously challenging Whiggish politics and principles. Wesley feared the influence of the Whigs because he believed that their political philosophy denied the biblical teaching that authority comes from God, and he feared that this could ultimately lead to anarchy. As we have already noted, Wesley stood for stability, continuity, and order during the political upheavals of his day, almost without exception choosing to side with the British monarch. So deeply ingrained was Wesley's loyalty to his king and country, that in 1756 he even offered to recruit soldiers for service in the king's army. Wesley wrote in a letter dated 1 March, 1756, that he was willing 'to raise for His Majesty's service at least two hundred volunteers, to be supported by contributions among themselves; and to be ready in case of an invasion for a year (if needed so long) at His Majesty's pleasure.'<sup>30</sup> Other evidence for Wesley's conservative political stance has already been cited in the overview of Weber's book so it is not necessary to repeat that here.

Thus, there was a notable difference between Wesley's economics and his politics. In the former, Wesley is the prophet, standing at the margins of society and challenging its basic presuppositions and structure. In the latter, Wesley serves as a chaplain to the Tory Party, defending the political structures as they currently stand against what he perceived to be radical elements that could potentially cause upheaval and disorder. It is little wonder that interpreters of Wesley today wrestle with these two very different portraits of his character.

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<sup>29</sup> Weber explains the divided political climate within which Wesley was born and raised: 'English political sentiment polarized around two alternative modes of representation as the form that English society should take for action in history. Tories supported the notion of the monarch ruling by divine indefeasible hereditary right – above the law because he or she was the source of the law, answerable to no one but God, due to passive obedience and nonresistance from all subjects... [Whereas] Whigs supported the concept of a government of king and Parliament together, with predominance of power on the parliamentary side.' Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 162.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Glenn Burton Hosman, 'The Problem of Church and State in the Thought of John Wesley as Reflecting His Understanding of Providence and His View of History,' PhD dissertation, Drew University, 1970, 237.

In this sense, Theodore Jennings and Theodore Weber are talking past one another. Jennings emphasizes Wesley's economics since his agenda is to portray Wesley as a forefather to modern liberation theologians. Weber, on the other hand, focuses on Wesley's politics, leading him to a vision of Wesley as a man who never recognized the political implications of his own theology. Or, more precisely, Jennings finds resonances between Wesley's defense of traditional, biblical economics and modern theologies of liberation. Weber, on the other hand, argues that no resonance can be found between Wesley's political commitment to a constitutional monarch and the values of liberal democracy embraced by modern Europe and North America.

A second important distinction to make in the study of Wesley's political theology concerns the audience to whom Wesley addressed his social ethic. Jennings argues that Wesley concerned himself with advocating for the poor by pressing for changes in government policies.<sup>31</sup> But were Wesley's social ethics directed at politicians *or* at the classes, bands, and societies of Methodists? Related to this, did Wesley understand the systematic and structural nature of poverty or did he view the transformation of individuals as the primary locus for addressing issues of economic injustice?

To be sure, the majority of Wesley's political theology found in his sermons and other writing is not directed toward the government, but at the Methodist laity. For example, Wesley's well-known instruction to gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can in his sermon 'The Use of Money' was directed neither at the whole of society nor at government leaders, but only at committed Methodists.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the aforementioned convictions Wesley held about common property do not imply that Wesley was a communist

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<sup>31</sup> Jennings disagrees with the prevailing view that Wesley saw no role for government in the alleviation of poverty. He writes, 'It simply is not the case that Wesley has nothing to say about the relation of poverty to government policy. Indeed it is precisely by way of his very solidarity with the poor and consequent awareness of their plight that the way is opened for Wesley to propose for government economic policy the same criterion he had found himself applying to the work of the Methodist movement.' In support, Jennings cites Wesley's *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions*. Jennings, *Good News for the Poor*, 66-69. This is perhaps pushing Wesley too far into the area of direct political involvement. Fundamentally, Wesley was concerned with the renewal of the *church* (that is, his beloved Church of England). A renewed church would then become effective in renewing the nation-state. Thus, Wesley's advocacy for change in governmental policy was generally indirect rather than direct.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 6: 124-136.

or socialist on the political level. Rather, he perceived the holding of common property to be a normative ethic *within the church*. This explains why Wesley attempted to implement his economic ideals only within the parameters of the select societies.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Wesley believed that the ultimate solution to societal ills was found within the transformation of *individual human hearts* by the grace of God working to undo the marks of original sin. For example, when Wesley spoke of the evils of war, he never offered a statement about war's systemic causes, but rather blamed war's existence upon the fallen nature of individual human beings.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, Wesley's many appeals advocating generosity to the poor remained largely on the level of personal charity; with a few notable exceptions to be examined later, any calls for the creation of progressive taxation or governmental welfare systems remain absent from Wesley's sermons and writing.<sup>35</sup> Maddox notes that even during the most politically active years of Wesley's life, 'political advocacy was hardly [Wesley's] dominant concern. Wesley published many more sermons in his last years encouraging his Methodist followers to share their resources voluntarily with others in need than he did tracts calling for the political reform of social and economic structures.'<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, an argument can be made that any expectation of Wesley to be aware of the systemic, political causes of poverty would be unfairly anachronistic. Wesley was a product of his own time – a time deeply committed to Enlightenment individualism and, in comparison to today, largely unaware of the systemic causes of poverty. Given this context, it is truly remarkable that Wesley, especially in the later years of his life, did in fact recognize some of

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<sup>33</sup> Randy Maddox, 'Visit the Poor: Wesley's Precedent for Wholistic Mission,' *Transformation: An International Dialogue on Mission and Ethics* 18.1 (2001): 41.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 362.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Wesley's sermon 'The Use of Money,' *Works*, 6: 124-36. One notable exception to this is Wesley's 'Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions' in which Wesley *does* call upon the government to make specific changes in policy in order to address the plight of the extremely poor. Specifically, Wesley calls for the prohibition of the distillation of hard liquors, a heavy tax on luxury goods, a reduction in the size of farms, limitations on excessive luxury, and an effort to pay off the national debt. See Wesley, *Works*, 11:58-59. Wesley's opposition to the slave trade is a second notable exception. These exceptions are so important that they will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Randy Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,' in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2004): 34.

the structural causes of poverty.<sup>37</sup> The German Wesley scholar Manfred Marquardt, for example, argues that even though Wesley had a limited awareness of the structural causes of society's ills (due to his historical location), his soteriology does provide a foundation and trajectory for a social ethic that addresses social ills on the systematic level. Indeed, Marquardt goes beyond this and, citing Wesley's 'Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,' concludes,

For Wesley, the king's task was therefore to use his power of taxation to more equitably distribute goods and to eliminate grave distresses, to provide food and employment for people...He regarded a number of governmental interventions as essential to achieving lower [food] prices, and he perceived the national government and Parliament as the appropriate agencies [to accomplish this].<sup>38</sup>

As already mentioned, the two most obvious examples of Wesley's willingness to engage in political advocacy on the systemic level can be found in his opposition to the slave trade and in his 'Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions' (written in 1773). Because these two aspects of Wesley's thought are so crucial for understanding his political theology, it is appropriate to examine them in more detail.

Wesley's willingness to oppose the status quo of society on a structural level is most clearly expressed in his vocal opposition to slavery and, particularly, the *trade* of slaves that many merchants in his nation profited from. Wesley described slavery as 'that execrable sum of all villainies,' in a letter to William Wilberforce written near the end of his life.<sup>39</sup> But the Anglican state church to which Wesley belonged generally tolerated the slave trade without objection. The few clergy in the first half of the eighteenth century who did vocally oppose the practice were largely ignored. Although there are indications that he disapproved of slavery and the treatment of blacks in his early years,<sup>40</sup> Wesley finally publicly announced his

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<sup>37</sup> For an examination of the changes in Wesley's eschatology in the final two decades of his life and the socioeconomic implications of this shift, see Randy Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation,' 21-52.

<sup>38</sup> Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, 46-47.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, 'Letter to William Wilberforce,' 24 February 1791. Wesley Center Online, accessed December, 11 2012, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1791>.

<sup>40</sup> Despite the objections of whites, Wesley baptized and administered the Lord's Supper to blacks and whites alike during his visit to the colonies in the 1730s. See Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*., 71.

opposition in 1774 with his tract, *Thoughts upon Slavery*. In his argument that British ships cease participating in the slave trade, Wesley appeals to both biblical theology and natural law. Adopting the common political rhetoric of the Enlightenment, Wesley interprets the issue of slavery to be fundamentally about human rights: 'Better no trade, than trade procured by villainy. It is far better to have no wealth than to gain wealth at the expense of virtue. Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood, of our fellow-creatures.'<sup>41</sup>

Thus, despite the laws and common practices of his nation which condoned the slave trade, Wesley critiqued British law and questioned the governing authorities who created them. To those who countered Wesley by arguing that slavery was perfectly legal, Wesley replied,

But can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means! Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy.<sup>42</sup>

Wesley proves through his opposition to the slave trade that he stands in that precarious space between Romans 13 and Revelation 13 – between submission to God-ordained authority and the recognition that the governmental principalities and powers can themselves become demonic. Theodore Jennings comments, 'Here Wesley, who on so many occasions must appeal to the appropriateness of obeying the law, breaks out into a clear statement of the relativity of all laws, the necessity of obeying the dictates of mercy and justice before any law.'<sup>43</sup> For Wesley, therefore, submission and passive obedience to authority were not absolutes. And in his vocal opposition to slavery, we find a prime example of Wesley's willingness to engage in advocacy not only on the level of the individual, but also in seeking political and structural change.

Slavery was not, however, the only issue that compelled Wesley to critique the laws of his nation. As mentioned earlier, he also proved willing to oppose economic policies that exacerbated the plight of the poor. In 1773, Wesley wrote his 'Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,' in which he chastised an economic

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<sup>41</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:74.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:70.

<sup>43</sup> Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 84.

structure that allowed some to live in luxury while others starved. Wesley argued that the source of this extreme poverty in England can be traced back to the distilling of spirituous liquors requiring inordinate amounts of wheat and grain, the ‘monopolizing of farms,’ the ‘enormous taxes, which are laid on almost everything that can be named,’ and the obsession of the rich with needless luxuries.<sup>44</sup>

The suggestions that Wesley offers for solving the problem of poverty are revealing. He calls upon the government to reduce the price of basic foods, limit the distillation of liquor, lay a heavy tax on the wealthy and on the luxury goods they purchase, decrease the size of farms (through breaking up monopolies), and ‘repress...luxury; whether by laws, by example, or by both.’<sup>45</sup> Thus, Wesley’s concern for alleviating extreme poverty and hunger compelled him to engage in open, public criticism of government policy. With these notable exceptions in mind, then, we may conclude that for Wesley the solution to economic injustice may in certain instances involve *both* addressing the needs of the individual *and* the reshaping of laws and public policy.<sup>46</sup>

Yet despite these two examples of Wesley’s willingness to engage in the political sphere, it must be acknowledged that for most of his life, Wesley remained reticent about pursuing socioeconomic reform by appealing to the government. Randy Maddox outlines three possible explanations for this reticence that have been offered by various scholars: 1) The conservative political values that Wesley inherited from his parents led him to distrust political revolutionaries seeking radical change to the socio-economic order, 2) Wesley held a deep-seated pessimism about the prospect of social change due to his ‘bourgeois status,’ and 3) Wesley rarely addressed the political arena, especially prior to the 1770s, because of how

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<sup>44</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:53-59.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:58.

<sup>46</sup> Though this paper is focused on the latter, ample evidence in John Wesley’s writings can be cited for the former. Wesley did believe that spiritual revival in each individual human heart would ultimately transform society and produce greater economic equality. In this sense, Wesley engages in what Graham Ward calls ‘macropolitics’ and ‘micropolitics.’ See Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 28-32. In today’s context when many Christians argue for either one or the other, it is refreshing to find in Wesley an example of concern for *both* personal piety and social justice.



small and politically insignificant his movement was within the culture at large.<sup>47</sup>

A third and final distinction that must be maintained in the study of John Wesley's political theology is the difference between Wesley's thought in his early years from that of his later years. Hynson's work has proven helpful for subsequent scholars who notice the shifting nature of Wesley's political theology. Although Jason Vickers critiques Hynson for offering a two-stage theory that is overly simplistic and for failing to properly account for the shifting political landscape of eighteenth-century England,<sup>48</sup> the historian must acknowledge that the most politically active years of John Wesley's life were the final two decades of his life. Throughout the 1770s and onward Wesley proved increasingly willing to challenge the status quo. It is fair to note, then, that Wesley's life does provide a *trajectory* that points toward political engagement – lobbying in the political sphere on behalf of the poor, critiquing structural issues which exacerbate class distinctions, and advocating for greater human liberty.<sup>49</sup> Asking where John Wesley would locate himself in today's political landscape is certainly a legitimate question for modern theologians.

## Conclusion

Interpreting the political and social ethics of John Wesley continues to be a crucial task for theologians seeking to bring the founder of Methodism into conversation with the church today. In this article, I have offered an overview of the differing interpretations of Wesley's political and economic commitments and suggested three distinctions that will be helpful to keep in mind for any interpreter of Wesley's social ethics. It is my hope that this article has provided a concise introduction to the study of Wesleyan political theology and that it will spur on future research in this area. Although a consensus on what a properly Wesleyan political theology looks like

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<sup>47</sup> Randy Maddox, 'Nurturing the New Creation,' 34. Maddox goes on to consider the role Wesley's millennial eschatology played in his convictions about God's work to bring in a new creation.

<sup>48</sup> Jason Vickers, *Wesley: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 68-71. Vickers maintains that Wesley's political loyalties shifted very little over his lifetime, but that the Tory party itself was what changed and that Wesley was carried along with it.

<sup>49</sup> I am not here arguing for specific, identifiable pivots in Wesley's political thinking or even for distinct 'stages' during his lifetime, as Weber does, since to do so would go beyond the scope of this paper.

is not likely to be reached soon, Wesley's theology continues to provide fertile soil in the important debates over Christian civic engagement.