

William J. Abraham, Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-160258246-0. Paperback. 80 pp + Notes, Bibliography and Subject Index

Derived from a series of lectures delivered at Barker Road Methodist Church in Singapore, this is essentially a study of John Wesley's epistemology. The author is Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, and a leading international scholar in his field. It includes many interesting observations on current philosophers of religion, including the work of Paul K. Moser on the filial knowledge of God, which has much in common with Wesley's empiricist approach to religious knowledge.

Abraham sees Wesley as deriving knowledge of God from three sources – the evidence drawn from the fulfilment of divine promises, the evidence taken from personal awareness of divine forgiveness and pardon, and the evidence of the power of God in our lives. These evidences form the subject matter of three of the book's four chapters, with the final chapter focusing on Wesley's view of divine revelation in Holy Scripture.

The logic of the argument for the knowledge of God based on divine promise is as follows: 'If many people have satisfied to a significant extent the conditions laid down for a sense of pardon from the guilt and power of sin, and if they, or a large proportion of them, then receive such a sense of pardon and power, this provides us with evidence for the truth of the claim that this promise was indeed made by a being with the wherewithal and the will to make good on that promise.' (p. 8) Giving a spin to Anselm's ontological argument, Abraham defines God as 'the greatest conceivable promise-giver and promise-keeper. God is that promise-giver and promise-keeper then which none greater can be thought.' (p. 13)

This argument is examined in light of Wesley's Aldersgate experience as well as the vast body of evidence in early Methodist autobiography. Abraham is aware that this kind of evidence makes only a modest claim. It is not deductive proof or conclusive evidence for the truth of the Gospel; it is contextual and *prima facie* and thus able to be defeated in various ways; it is not subject to any formal quantitative analysis and is thus best seen as part of a wider cumulative argument. It persuades the intellect but in the end assent becomes a matter of personal judgement. Of course it may be objected that such evidences are not subject to scientific explanation. This for Abraham is beside the point. To force theology into the procrustean bed of scientific explanation and argument is a category mistake.

Reliance on this kind of evidence places Wesley in one sense among the great empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. And yet there are also important differences between these and Wesley. His notion that there was very good empirical evidence for the reality of God would have been rejected by the empiricists, whose trust of the senses extended only to the natural world and not beyond it. In Wesley's empiricism, just as we possess through our physical senses the perception of the natural world so we possess the faculty of spiritual insight. Of course many people experience perceptions which are clearly illusory. This merely shows that our spiritual sense is not infallible. In the case of the physical senses there may be defeaters that prove any particular perception to be false. For example, I may think my house is being broken into but upon closer inspection I discover it is my son returning

home late. This in no sense invalidates the overall legitimacy and dependability of sense perception. It only shows that it may in certain instances be mistaken. In just the same way our spiritual perceptions may be mistaken without invalidating the legitimacy or dependability of spiritual perceptions as such.

Abraham's insistence that God must be construed as divine agent and not spirited away into some ahistorical 'ground of all being' is refreshing.

With the whole Christian tradition Wesley saw God not as some abstract deity...but as an intimate personal agent who is identified precisely in terms of action predicates. This God is the one who created the world, redeemed it through the work of his Son, sent the promised Holy Spirit, has forgiven our sins and the like. To reject the idea of God as an agent is simply to unravel the critical conception of God at the heart of the Christian Gospel. (p. 12)

Abraham sees many parallels between Wesley and the work of Alvin Plantinga, especially the latter's claim that knowledge is constituted by warrant. When our cognitive faculties function properly, warrant is made available. We are designed by God in such a way as to possess a *sensus divinitatus* by which we obtain a natural knowledge of God. However because this capacity is impeded by sin, God sent God's Son, gave us Holy Scripture and sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we might come to believe the truth of the gospel with accuracy. This special revelation provides the cognitive environment that is appropriate to obtain knowledge constituted by proper warrant.

The theme of perception of the divine, drawn upon by Wesley, appears prominently in the work of William P. Alston. Both see the perception of the divine taking place in a social and communal context. Both utilise cumulative case arguments both are aware of the close parallels between sense perception and the perception of the divine. Where they differ is that Wesley has virtually no confidence in natural theology whereas Alston is more than happy to use it as part of his cumulative case argument for Christianity. But it is in the work of Paul Moser that Abraham sees the most interesting parallel with Wesley's epistemology in that both give a privileged position to the filial knowledge of God. Through a reconciling personal knowledge of God we enter into a child-parent relationship which is both personally transforming and morally potent. For both Wesley and Moser the filial knowledge of God has the highest authority in theological epistemology.

To the argument from the fulfilment of divine promise, and the argument from the experience of God's reconciling love, Abraham then moves to a third argument in Wesley - the argument from the power of God at work in our lives. This involves a consideration of both 'conspicuous sanctity' (holiness) and the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. The argument from divine power is an 'abductive argument to the best explanation.' When we encounter holiness and/or charismatic phenomena, these are best explained in terms of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The phenomena provide persuasive evidence of God's existence, since without the existence of God they remain unexplained anomalies. Again this is not proof in its own right but part of a cumulative case argument for the truth of Christianity.

That aspect of the argument which focuses on holiness is fairly straightforward, but when he moves to discussing charismatic phenomena Abraham is less convincing. In Wesley's response to Conyers Middleton's essay on 'Free Enquiry,' Wesley rightly points out that the undermining of testimony from miracles entails the undermining of all historical testimony. For Wesley, historical evidence is perhaps less reliable since it is weakened by the succession of time and is often complex. The evidence of supernatural experience on the other hand is contemporaneous, direct, and simple. The skeptics can erode traditional arguments as much as they like; they can do little to remove evidence from the fulfillment of divine promise and the perception of the divine in Christian experience. In a rather nice passage, Abraham claims that,

Whenever we encounter the spectacular power of God in conversion and charismatic phenomena we see but the phosphorescent crest of a wave that enables us to detect a sea of divine action and activity whose boundaries we cannot chart. We are led through these special acts of God to extend our sense of divine action in creation and Providence, whether characterised by the spectacular or not. Hence they lead us into that wider vision of God that Wesley insisted was central to the whole theistic vision of the world and ourselves. (pp. 56-7)

This does not seem to take sufficient account of the fact that Wesley was concerned to weigh up the validity of supernatural manifestations on a case-by-case basis and did not generally give *carte blanche* approval to any and all charismatic phenomena. Sometimes Wesley attributed such phenomena to human rather than immediately divine causes, or rather to human response to a supernatural gospel. When the power of the Spirit at work through the preaching of the Gospel, came into 'vital union' with human emotions, there were often remarkable results. Writing to Thomas Church, Vicar of Battersea and Prebendary of St. Paul's, in *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*(1746), Wesley responded to the charge that he looked upon people falling down in fits and their subsequent recovery as wholly supernatural.

It is not quite plain. I look upon some of these cases as wholly natural, on the rest as mixed, both the disorders and the removals being partly natural and partly not...I believe there was a supernatural power on the minds of the persons there mentioned, which occasioned their bodies to be so affected by the natural laws of their vital union.^[1]

The 'supernatural' element in such occurrences was the Spirit-anointed preaching of the Gospel - the declaration of the love of God, the rigours of the Law, and the offer of Christ as the only Saviour from hell (characteristic themes in early Methodist preaching). The natural response to this on the part of those to whom such a message was quite new and remarkable, was often to fall down and cry out for mercy in penitence, or to shout with joy at deliverance. But such reactions were incidental to the preaching of the Gospel. They were never at the heart of Wesley's teaching, nor were they to be the focus of attention. Often it was the recovery of the believer from paroxysms that Wesley attributed to the finger of God, rather than the manifestations themselves. On April 26th 1739, after declaring that God would 'bear witness to His word...Immediately one, and another, and another sunk to the earth; they dropped on every side as thunderstruck. One of them cried aloud. We besought God in her behalf, and he turned her heaviness into joy. A second being in the same agony, we called upon God for her also; and he spoke peace unto her soul.'^[2]

Wesley concedes that at least some of the 'wildfire enthusiasm' at work in his meetings was clearly of demonic origin. He wrote a friend in London advising that he 'be not alarmed that Satan sows tares among the wheat of Christ. It ever has been so especially on any remarkable outpouring of his Spirit; and ever will be so, till he is chained up for a thousand years. Till then he will always ape, and endeavour to counteract, the work of the Spirit of Christ.'^[3] In 1745 Wesley concluded after examining some who had 'almost every night the last week cried aloud during the preaching' and had undergone various kinds of other physical manifestations that they had been under demonic influence.

These symptoms I can no more impute to any natural cause, than to the Spirit of God. I can make no doubt but it was Satan tearing them, as they were coming to Christ. And hence proceeded those grievous cries, whereby he might design both to discredit the work of God, and to affright fearful people from hearing the word, whereby their souls might be saved.^[4]

In his sermon, *The Nature of Enthusiasm*, Wesley gives a concise definition of enthusiasm as ‘a religious madness arising from some falsely imagined influence or inspiration from God; at least from imputing something to God which ought not to be imputed to Him, or expecting something from God which ought not to be expected from Him.’^[5] This would seem to suggest that Wesley’s preference was to examine the validity of that any particular claim to divine influence, rather than simply affirm all charismatic phenomena as evidence of the divine.

No doubt Abraham is correct in reminding us that

[o]pposition to charismatic phenomena is not a neutral, objective affair...Cognitive malfunction is not just an individual or personal phenomena; it is also a social and institutional phenomenon. Intellectual vice is not just personal; it is also social in nature. Much opposition to charismatic phenomena is a matter of cognitive malfunction in the normative conventions, gate-keeping mechanisms, ethos, and practices of scholarship. Thus we must be on guard at on the lookout for deep structural problems in the grammar and technology of scholarship in this domain. (p.59)

But of course this is as true of charismatic Methodists as it is of both liberal and conservative opponents of Charismatic renewal.

In his final chapter, Abraham traces the way that Wesley ‘combined his commitment to reason with an even stronger commitment to special divine revelation.’ (p. 62) Though Wesley may be said to have had a very high view of scriptural authority, he was no fundamentalist. He was quite willing to draw upon evidence from outside of scripture in arguing for the truths of Christianity. For example, he saw the Anglican articles as authoritative, gave a privileged position to the scriptural interpretations of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and accepted the Apostles Creed as a faithful distillation of scriptural teaching. Abraham faults Wesley for elevating scripture to the place of an epistemic norm. It is best he argues to see scripture as a means of grace which enables us to find a way to heaven rather than a means of settling all questions in epistemology. For Abraham, ‘there is something profoundly mistaken in the turn Wesley took when he thought he could make revelation a foundational category that would act as the source and foundation of all other epistemological claims in theology.’ (p. 71) Yet Wesley’s strategy is so deeply entrenched in the classical Christian tradition that it is not easily swept aside. Abraham is aware of this and does not discount Wesley’s claim in a superficial manner. Wesley wishes to privilege the special revelation given in Holy Scripture because if anything outside of it should be constituted as normative, the result would be to give reason or evidence a higher status than divine revelation. We cannot make anything more basic, more foundational, than God’s own self-revelation.

The problem is that Wesley is not always consistent at this point. Sometimes he makes the inner work of the Holy Spirit the foundation of theology; at other times it is scripture that fulfils that role. Then too, he wants everything to be derived from scripture yet often uses arguments that rely on evidence from outside of it. It does not help his case that his exegesis of the texts chosen to support his model requires him to squeeze them into places they don’t quite fit. In a tantalising statement not followed through on in this work, Abraham makes the claim, on p. 74, that ‘the whole appeal to scripture has a way of upending elements in the Christian faith that Wesley himself held dear and that easily disappear from the life of Methodism in succeeding generations.’^[6]

For some, abandoning Wesley's epistemic conception of scripture is fraught with spiritual depression, in that they fear that they will lose everything they hold spiritually and ideologically, if they abandon it...The pastoral concerns cut deeply in the opposite direction too. Many have lost their faith...because the epistemic conception of scripture undermined the wider classical faith to which Wesley was committed. In time the quest for foolproof foundations turned back on itself in self-destruction, like a snake choking on its own tail or like a dog poisoning itself with its own vomit. This is not a pretty sight in the history of modern theology. The drive to derive everything from the scriptural text in fact introduces a virus that can destroy much more than it preserves, which is one reason why more modest epistemic conceptions of scripture are now the conventional wisdom in some conservative theological circles. (p.75)

What we can appropriate from Wesley's high view of divine revelation is its function as an arbiter of other truth claims. Once the divine revelation given in Holy Scripture is affirmed, any theological claim that contradicts this special revelation must be dismissed as false. Divine revelation therefore is a 'threshold concept.' Rather than functioning as an epistemic norm, it tells us when we have gone beyond the threshold of orthodox Christian belief. What we have in Scripture is divine testimony, the mind of God. Any truth claims we now advance must cohere with this testimony.

Aldersgate and Athens requires some previous exposure to the philosophy of religion, and acquaintance with contemporary writers in the field of epistemology would be an asset. But it may be read by any serious reader with profit. Wesley proves to be a valuable mentor in reflecting on the vexed question of the connection between faith and reason and William Abraham guides us through the territory with skill.

[1] John Wesley, 'The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained,' Rupert E. Davies, ed. *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature and Design*, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989,) 9: 207-08.

[2] Nehemiah Curnock, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, Second Edition (London: Charles H. Kelly, n.d.), 2: 184.

[3] John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* [Jackson Edition] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint of 1872 edition), 11:407.

[4] Wesley, *Works*, 1:415.

[5] John Wesley, 'The Nature of Enthusiasm,' in Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Wesley's Standard Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1955 reprint), 2: 90.

[6] Abraham discusses the more general claim in *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) and applies it to Wesleyan theology in 'The End of Wesleyan Theology,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 7-25.

About the Author:

Glen O'Brien

is Head of Humanities and Senior Lecturer in Church History at Booth College, a Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity. He is Research Fellow and Secretary of the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research and an Honorary Research Fellow of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre. Along with Professor Hilary Carey of the University of Newcastle he is convening a research project that will result in a new scholarly history of Australian Methodism. In June 2011 he will be in residence at Duke Divinity School, North Carolina engaged in post-doctoral research on John Wesley and the American Revolution.