WESLEY ON THE RACK: RACK ON WESLEY

A Review Article

By Dr. Ben Witherington III

John Wesley has not been well-served by those who have attempted to write his biography, and doubtless there are many reasons for this fact. Certainly one of the most important factors in the 20th century has been that there has been no adequate critical edition of Wesley's works on which to base such a biography. Consequently, Wesleyan scholars have found themselves severely handicapped, expecially in comparison to their colleagues who have done their work on other major Protestant figures such as Luther or Calvin. Now that we find ourselves in *medias res* in regard to the producing of the necessary critical edition of Wesley's works, many will want to ask if it is not premature to either attempt or expect an adequate critical biography of Wesley. Nonetheless, various attempts have been and will continue to be made in this direction, and none of those so far produced more deserves our close scrutiny than Henry D. Rack's *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989). In many ways this work is a summing up of some of the best insights of Wesleyan scholarship in this century, and we would lose much of the mature fruit of long reflection on Wesley in this century if a biography like this had not been produced, even if it has come to us as "one untimely born."

Rack's *Reasonable Enthusiast* is clearly the most comprehensive, critical treatment of the life and work of John Wesley currently available. Among its virtues are a detailed interaction with the primary sources, a rather extensive grasp of the secondary literature (though with notable *lacunae*), and an attempt to set Wesley in the context of both his world, through socio-historical analysis, and of his Revival movement, by examining his antecedents and co-revivalists.

The background chapter which introduces the life of Wesley is, in many ways the weakest chapter of the entire work. It would have been well if Rack had begun at least as early as 1611 in his survey and carefully traced the religious, political, social, and economic developments and their interweavings up to the point of John Wesley's birth. Wesley's views on a variety of matters could have been better understood if sufficient space had been devoted to a variety of groups and factors such as the non-Jurors, or the various societies with which Anton Horneck was involved, or the important influence and interrelationship of Puritanism and Pietism in English society in general and in Samuel and Susanna's families in particular. Later in the work the attempts at social analysis are interesting, but hardly scientific. For one thing, Methodism

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prospered not only in areas where the Anglican Church was weak but even in some areas where it was notably well established. For another, the attempt to illuminate the social world of early Methodists (pp. 437ff.) by analyzing some partial data from the Manchester area and the West Country suffers from trying to make too much out of too little data, data which could hardly be called a representative sampling. To give but one example, a good deal more could and should have been said about the connection between the colliers and Methodism in the Northeast to diversify the survey.

The discussion of the co-revivalists is much more adequate than the socio-historical and contextual analysis. Rack makes it quite clear that John Wesley was not the founder of the movement of which he came to be seen as the main leader. Particularly helpful is the explanation of the roles of G. Whitefield, H. Harris and others in the revival. Detailed attention is also given to understanding and critiquing the motives, purpose, and personal development of Wesley, in part to de-mythologize the picture of Wesley developed by early (and late) encomiums. Throughout, there is an attempt to provide balanced judgments by means of both a diachronic and also synchronic analysis of Wesley's life, thought, and experience. This sometimes leads to a disconcerting disjointedness in the later stages of the book where the diachronic presentation takes a back seat to chapters which are basically topical in character. One is left with the impression that here is a biography that is the product of many years of study and analysis, and it is often notable for its fairness, unlike for instance the work of S. Ayling.

This study does also have some salient weaknesses. For one thing, the temptation to both psychologize Wesley and provide purely naturalistic explanations for apparent supernatural phenomena (due to the author's post-Enlightenment values?) is not always resisted (cf. p. 146-57, 167, 383, 408, 427, 434). The result is that Richard Watson's complaint about Southey's life of Wesley might also be applied to Rack — "the guidance of the Spirit is too often reduced to personal inclination or ambition," "spiritual phenomena are reduced to aberrations with a natural or psychological explanation," and "firmness of purpose is described as inflexibility or lack of human compassion." This results in Rack portraying Wesley as "reasonable," but in the end not truly an "enthusiast" though "he would have been one if he could."

In regard to doctrinal matters, one kept looking and hoping for a discussion of "preventing grace" from Wesley's point of view, and in the end it was not to be found in this biography. A better and more consistent tracing of the trajectory of Wesley's thoughts about Christian Perfection would also have enhanced this study considerably. There is a certain tendency in *Reasonable Enthusiast* to downplay the importance for Wesley and his movement of certain of the essentials of doctrinal orthodoxy. Wesley's stress may well have been on experience and on orthopraxy more than on orthodoxy, but it is quite clear, not only from his *Standard Sermons* but also from letters like the famous one to a Roman Catholic in 1749, that the dictum about "thinking and let think" was not in regard to matters Wesley saw as essential for salvation. Wesley

was not in fact a latitudinarian, as his repeatedly stated views on Roman Catholicism, to give but one example, show. One must beware of seeing Wesley as an early advocate of the sort of doctrinal pluralism now found in Protestantism in general and Methodism in particular.

In regard to tell-tale signs of personal development, it is rather disconcerting that Rack does not quote the crucial letter of Wesley to his father in which he refuses to come and take over the ministry in Epworth, something Ayling rightly makes much of. In an otherwise helpful study of the antecedents and influences that led to Aldersgate, Rack sometimes overstresses the natural factors which may have precipitated the Aldersgate experience. While it is quite true that Wesley's religious problems and the solutions he found to them at Aldersgate and elsewhere were conditioned by his upbringing, psychological development, biblical models and a host of other natural factors, the story of Wesley's spiritual formation is not fully told by evaluating such factors and influences. Room must be left for divine influence, as Wesley himself insisted. One wonders whether revival movements or religious experiences and "affections" can ever adequately be explained or described in purely naturalistic terms without the flaw of reductionism. Here due attention to G. Clapper's work on "religious affections" would have provided a more full-orbed treatment of the Aldersgate experience. Having said this, I think Rack does a much better job in evaluating what actually happened to Wesley at Aldersgate and how it affected both his experience and theological understanding than Ayling and many others including V.H.H. Green and J. Fowler.[1] The trick is to avoid either over- or under-estimating this turning point in Wesley's life.

A. Outler's complaint that we need an adequate biography of "the older Mr. Wesley" to match V.H.H. Green's "The Young Mr. Wesley' is not fully satisfied in this work. In particular, the analysis of 1770-91 focuses almost entirely on the later crises in the Revival (over Calvinism, ordination, succession) or the ways Wesley modified his earlier views on various matters, **without** an adequate accounting of the life of the ongoing and growing movement and Wesley's day to day handling of it. Here more attention to the work of T. Albin and D.L. Watson, among others, would have been salutary.

It is also notable that Rack does not draw on the significant work of J. Tyson on C. Wesley. Had he done so, we might be better able to grasp what it is that caused Charles to remain more traditionally Angelican on issues like apostolic succession. What effect did his poetry have on the growing Wesleyan movement? If Methodism was to some extent born, or at least bred, in song, how did John Wesley relate to and use this important part of the movement? On such important matters Rack is largely silent, and we could have hoped for more on Wesley's views on matters like infant baptism as well. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that Rack has not seen or read the work of Bishop Borgen on Wesley's view of the sacraments, even though it has been in print for almost two decades. Rack, to be sure, freely admits some of these *lacunae*, but that does not make them less significant. Rack, however, is quite right that eucharistic piety was not *the* center of devotion or norm for every Sun-

day's worship in the 18th century, either for Anglicanism or the Methodist movement, and modern interest in liturgical renewal should not lead us to distort the 18th centry situation (cf. p. 419). The Methodist movement was largely a preaching and small group movement that in due course also had sacraments, not a sacramental renewal movement.

Rack tends to see Wesley as eclectic in his use of a variety of sources, always using them for his own purposes. Yet we should not underestimate the influence on Wesley of individuals from Christian antiquity like Macarius or E. Syrus. Wesley was not labeled "primitive Christianity" for nothing by his friends. While Wesley was indeed in many ways a *homo unius libri,* he was also strongly influenced by various sources from early Christianity, especially in his views on holiness, sanctification, and perfection. Here a careful use of the works of L. Keefer and T. Campbell on Wesley and Christian antiquity would have enhanced this study considerably. One also suspects that, while Rack is largely right that Wesley's Journal was propaganda and an exercise in apologetics, more could have been gleaned about Wesley's real views on Christian antiquity and a host of other subjects by an ongoing critical sifting of that publication in this biography.

One of the major contributions of this biography is the attention given to Mr. Wesley's well-chronicled difficulties in affairs of the heart with Sophey Hopkey, Grace Murray, Molly Vazeille and others. Here Rack is often both fair and insightful. Indeed it does appear that Wesley had an inadequate appreciation of the goodness of human sexuality, so much so that even so devoted a Wesleyan scholar as L. Tyerman rightly found Wesley's published views on the single life a clear indication that something was not right in this area of Wesley's life. This is especially the case since Wesley said in print **after** he was married that celibacy was to be preferred. For a person that kept stressing that holiness and happiness went hand in hand, one might have hoped for a vision of holiness that was less Augustinian on human sexuality. Rack is also to be commended for giving the role of women in the ongoing Methodist movement more space than is usually the case.

Since this biography also purports to be about "the Rise of Methodism" and not just about John Wesley, one may properly query why only about 10 pages out of some 554 pages of text are directly devoted to the development of American Methodism, which by the end of Wesley's life was nearly as large a phenomenon as English Methodism. A great deal more needed to be said not only about Wesley's relationship to Asbury and others he sent to the U.S., but also especially about the Irish Methodists who came to the colonies on their own, such as R. Strawbridge, or R. Williams, or B. Heck. Thomas Webb also deserved much more than the paragraph he is given. Had Rack given more attention to these matters, a clearer understanding of why Wesley felt pressured to ordain some of his preachers would have emerged.

In some regards the production of a life of John Wesley is analogous to the process of revelation and preservation that has been going on in the Sistine Chapel of late. As layer after layer of veneer and dirt have been peeled away

from Michelangelo's masterpiece we have begun to see his r
different light, and in its true colors. This also is the aim
biography worth its salt, and Rack has helped us by removi
veneer of earlier and later encomiums. Yet in the end we co
not just for new revelations and insights but also more true
judgments about Wesley. Care must be taken that preservation a
tion is the aim, lest when we remove the lacquer we also def
form. The portrait of Wesley that Rack offers is indeed reason
it is not always right, but it may be faulted for not sufficient
the spirit of "enthusiasm" that so characterized both Wesley
ment. This "enthusiasm" was not merely an early Revival al
ongoing *leitmotif* for Wesley and his movement. At the end of
has placed too much stress on the 1766 reflections of a depres
p. 546), without giving sufficient weight to the evidence els
plains how Wesley himself was branded an enthusiast. Whil
that "it is a great mistake to suppose that Wesley was wholly
sions and inward feelings," (p. 549) it is equally untrue to
a "cold fish" or that he seldom **felt** zeal or love for God and nei
complaint in the main was that he had **more** need of the sort
saw in his followers, not that he had none. To suggest that We
inward witness," and that his assurance, by and large, came
vation of God's work in others does less than justice to the
hunger was always to be a better Christian, and to experience
grace, and this at times led him to overly harsh judgments ab
spiritual state of affairs. But it has been ever thus in Christian
place so much stress on the experiential side of things.

And what are we finally to say about Rack's evaluation o
Wesley and others helped to spawn? R. Lovelace once obs
without wine are no better than wine without skins. It is th
John Wesley, and that which most distinguished him from
he knew that revival without reformation was as inadequate
without revival both in the individual Christian's life and in t
Christian movement. We would do well to ponder this, a
understanding that reasonable enthusiast John Wesley. Rack g
attention to the interface between revival and reformation a
related one to the other.

Perhaps when all is said and done it is **our own** post-enlig
view, with its unfounded skepticism about the supernatural, th
of Wesley most calls into question. If we are offended by
be Wesley's naivete about such matters, perhaps it would be
why this is so. The answer to this question may well expla
us are more prone to see Wesley as fundamentally a rationalis
mode, and others of us see him as basically an "enthusiast
I suspect that Wesley is a much more complex figure than eit
might lead one to think. Henry Rack is to be thanked for

NOTES

[1]In various places in the work there are small errors or omissions, e.g. p. 201 para. 2 l.3 — "In" not "It;" p. 213 l.2 — "they??;" p. 267 para. 4 l.1 — "she??;" p. 371 para. 3 l.12 — defended rather than befriended?; p. 387 l.13-14 — a whole line seems to be missing here. The "spiritual senses were obviously claims . . . ;" p. 436 para. 3 l.4 — "unco" religious??;" p. 498 l.4 — "hs;" p. 566 n. 99 reference lost. In various other notes, pagination is omitted.