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## The Doctrine of the Trinity in John Wesley's Prose and Poetic Works

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### Abstract

One may easily judge John Wesley's pietistic and anti-rationalistic Christianity to be an encumbrance toward a well-developed doctrine of the Trinity. That Wesley produced very limited systematic treatment on the subject augments the assumption that his theology, though implicitly trinitarian in general is, nonetheless, superficial in its ontology, and thereby, tends toward a subjective functionalism. This essay argues against such a pre-understanding, and appeals for an "organic" appreciation of John Wesley's broad body of prose and poetical works, in order to recognize the solid doctrine of the immanent Trinity that is foundational to his soteriology. As a judicious editor of Charles' hymns, John Wesley has artfully woven together a restatement of classical trinitarianism that is not only profound and subtle, but also edifying and practical. The depth and simplicity of the doctrine of the Trinity which one encounters in Wesleyan metrical theology, of course, owes much to the experimental genius of John and Charles. What must not be forgotten is that the substance of their trinitarian hymnody depended much upon a faithful re-appropriation of the ecumenical Creeds, and no less, the mystical, illuminating piety which is at the heart of these dogmatic formularies.

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There is no doubt that John Wesley was an avowed Trinitarian, as attested by his vigorous defense of that doctrine against the Arians, Socinians and Deists of his times.<sup>1</sup> However, scholars like Frank Whaling are of the opinion that Wesley regarded belief in the Trinity as secondary when compared to foundational beliefs in "prevenient grace, justification by faith, assurance, sanctification and perfect love."<sup>2</sup> Albert Outler, in highlighting the shortage of references to this doctrine in Wesley's own writings, suggests that for Wesley, as with "pietists generally, abstruse doctrines are better believed devoutly than analysed rationally."<sup>3</sup>

Although Wesley left posterity without a systematic theological treatise and minimal material on the Trinity, this does not necessarily mean that he relegated the doctrine to a subordinate position. Wesley's clearly orthodox defense of the doctrine during the trinitarian controversies of his times and the tacit trinitarian framework of his biblical, soteriological theology certainly indicate otherwise. In fact, Wesley not

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," in *The Drew Gateway* 59/2 (Spring 1990), 26-7.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Whaling, ed., "Introduction," in *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Outler, in an introduction to Wesley's Sermon "On the Trinity," in *The Works of John Wesley* 2 (Nashville, Abingdon Press), 373.

only considered the doctrine of the Trinity to be vitally important to the Christian life, he advocated a complete trinitarianism that was at once practical and “speculative.”<sup>4</sup>

However, it is our contention that Wesley's full doctrine of the Trinity can only be appreciated by surveying his theological and homiletical material *alongside* the body of Wesleyan hymnody. In other words, John Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* must be evaluated in the context of the hymns of Charles, which John edited. It is further argued that Wesley's profound yet practical, metrical theology of the Trinity is deeply anchored in the Anglican Prayer Book tradition, with particular indebtedness to the ecumenical creeds of Nicaea and Athanasius.

## **Wesley's Notes and Sermons: An Implicit Trinitarian Grammar**

T. W. Pillow reminds us that though Wesley rarely makes direct references to the doctrine of the Trinity in his writings, “it is fair to say that he thinks constantly in Trinitarian terms.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley understood the work of salvation to be purposed by the Father, purchased by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> The major emphasis of his biblical annotations and homiletical material is on the individual's experience of the redemptive work of the Trinity, understood christologically. This, of course, does not preclude an equal emphasis on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. So we see in Wesley also, a distinctive “pneumatocentric soteriology,” greatly influenced by the Eastern fathers and by the seventeenth century British Anglican and Puritan traditions.<sup>7</sup>

According to Wesley, the Holy Spirit is the mediator and transmitter of the graces of the Father and the Son in bringing about an ever-increasing desire after God and the knowledge of the Son of God in the believer.<sup>8</sup> Justification and sanctification are inseparable but distinct works of God in a believer's life. The first represents an external relational change with regard to God through Christ's work for us, and the second, an interior transformation through the Spirit's work in us.<sup>9</sup> For Wesley, the Christian's assurance of salvation is a two-fold experience: it includes the objective direct witness of the Spirit of one's divine sonship and the correlative subjective experience of the consciousness of God's favor.<sup>10</sup> Thus we can see in these key soteriological themes an implicit, but important trinitarian “undercurrent” within

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the term “speculative” is understood within Wesley's positive use of the word, which is not in opposition to “practical.” See para. 12, n. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Wright Pillow, “John Wesley's Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Cumberland Seminarian* 24/1 (1986), 1. This is only a logical outcome since Wesley was a biblical theologian whose interpretative and methodological framework of Scripture was completely trinitarian, as Geoffrey Wainwright has demonstrated. See “Wesley's Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36/1 (Spring 2001), 7-29.

<sup>6</sup> Pillow, 3. See also, Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” 40.

<sup>7</sup> Outler, “Introduction,” in *Works* 1, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”, I. 2, in *Works* 2. See Outler, “Introduction,” *Works* 1, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, “The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God,” *Works* 1, 431-443.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, “The Witness of the Spirit,” Discourses I and II, 267-298, and “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” 299-313, in *Works* 2.

Wesley's prose-works. This tacit, theological foundation is made clear in Wesley's one homily on the Trinity, to which we shall turn to next.

### **Wesley's Single Definitive Exposition on the Trinity?**

Wesley's only protracted commentary on this subject consists of a single sermon, drafted and published in 1775, entitled "A Sermon on 1st John, v. 7." Admittedly, Wesley hesitated to term the doctrine of the Trinity as a "fundamental truth" because of the ambiguity of the term itself.<sup>11</sup> He also would not insist upon another's use of the words "Persons" or "Trinity" because they are words that do not appear in the Bible (though he had no hesitation in using the terms himself). However, he was unequivocal in his assertion that the truth of the "Three-One God" is not a secondary doctrine since "it enters into the very heart of Christianity."<sup>12</sup>

Belief in the Trinity, in Wesley's opinion, is an epistemological given, "a fact" which is not mysterious and undeniable, as are other realities like air and light, the earth and sun, the human soul and body.<sup>13</sup> The incomprehensibility and mystery, he added, lie in "the manner" in which the Three are One, which is not recorded in revelation, and therefore, something which Wesley needed "to have no concern with."<sup>14</sup> From these statements, J. Young suggests that though Wesley does not deny the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, his primary concern is the economic Trinity, as he "is neither given to metaphysical speculation about the doctrine; nor is he too serious about it."<sup>15</sup>

While it is evident that Wesley affirmed the Trinitarian character of the Christian religion, it would seem from this sermon that he made no attempt to account for it. This is perhaps, in part, due to Wesley's primary concern with the more "experimental" or practical aspects of theology. So, although Wesley understood that the consistent encountering of Trinitarian presence in one's life "is not the experience of *babes*, but rather *fathers in Christ*," he nevertheless insisted on this:

But I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till 'he hath' (as St. John speaks) 'the witness in himself'; till 'the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God' – that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son – and having this witness he honours the Son and the Blessed Spirit 'even as he honours the Father'.<sup>16</sup>

As such, G. Wainwright notes that the above passage summarizes "the biblical basis, the soteriological grounding, and the doxological intention" of Wesley's trinitarianism.<sup>17</sup> Wesley's apparent aversion to abstract notions about the Trinity and

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, "On the Trinity," *Works* 2, 376.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 384.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 379- 383.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 384.

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Young "Some Assumptions and Implications regarding John Wesley's View of the Trinity: 'The Root of All Vital Religion,'" in *Quarterly Review* 18 (Summer 1998), 139.

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, "On the Trinity," *Works* 2, 385.

<sup>17</sup> Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," 26.

his concomitant emphasis on the practical and experimental aspect of the “redemptive Trinity” indicates his repudiation of the rationalistic tendencies in certain sectors of Anglican theology during his time.<sup>18</sup>

## Does Wesley Propound a “Functional” Doctrine of the Trinity?

Although the incisive emphasis of this sermon is “that the mystery of ‘the Three-One God’ is better left as mystery, to be pondered and adored,” Wesley does not advance a purely economic trinitarianism.<sup>19</sup> Wainwright brings to our attention Wesley’s letter to Jane Catherine March written four years earlier, where Wesley, while making the same point immediately added this qualifier: “The quaint device of styling them three offices rather than persons gives up the whole doctrine.”<sup>20</sup>

Wesley’s caution towards a rational approach to the Trinity merely indicates that speculations about the Trinity “must not be overblown nor exalted to the rank of definite statements.”<sup>21</sup> While this sermon is a primary source of Wesley’s mature trinitarian reflections, it is a single homiletical work among a voluminous body of writings hurriedly composed (as Wesley himself admitted), and therefore should neither be taken as Wesley’s *complete* nor *definitive* statement on the subject.<sup>22</sup> That

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<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that Wesley rejected all Anglican formulations on the doctrine of the Trinity. So, Outler highlights that “it is plain enough that the *substance* of Wesley’s own trinitarian doctrine follows faithfully the traditional Anglican line hewed out by Bishop John Pearson, of Chester, in *An Exposition of the Creed* (first edition, 1659; fifth edition [last in Pearson’s lifetime], 1683; but see also the enlarged folio edition of 1732, which Wesley would have seen at Oxford.)” See Outler, “Introductory Comment” to Wesley’s sermon “On the Trinity,” *Works* 2, 373.

<sup>19</sup> We do not suggest that all economic approaches to the Trinity are modalistic in considering Wesley’s rejection of Socinian theological conceptions. What is crucial to note here is that Wesley’s appropriation of covenant theology, as shall be elaborated below, presupposes an implicit *continuity and discontinuity* between the immanent and economic trinitaries. While this theological distinction is somewhat artificial, the demerits of abandoning this classical formulary far outweigh the merits. This is especially evident within some recent interpretations of Karl Rahner’s theological *Grundaxiom*, where the distinctions are either conflated (thus erased), or refused in favor of an “economic” trinitarianism. Hence, in the former, inappropriate economic/created categories are apt to be transposed into the divine life. In the latter case, as Gary D. Badcock has highlighted, there would be no “absolute ground for salvation in the being of the triune God himself” in the absence of an ontological Trinity; see *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 234. With particular reference to Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s radical agnosticism toward any ontological trinity, David S. Cunningham baldly states that the tacit presupposition of her position is that “unless God exists wholly for the sake of humanity, then God must be nothing at all”; see *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, Massachusetts & Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998). Hence, the salutary intention of emphasizing the economic, soteriological dimension of the Trinity over against abstract, philosophical notions of God cannot dispense with ontology if it is to steer away from anthropocentrism. It is at this juncture that Wesley’s “experimental” approach to the Trinity with its salvific focus reminds us of the necessity to re-appropriate the patristic notion of *theologia* and *oikonomia*, as distinct but not separate categories.

<sup>20</sup> See *Letters*, ed. Telford, Volume V, 270 [August 3, 1771], as quoted by Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” 39.

<sup>21</sup> Outler, “Introductory Comment” to “On the Trinity,” in *Works* 2, 373.

<sup>22</sup> In Wesley’s short preface to this sermon, he notes: “Some days since I desired to preach on this text [1 John 5:7]. I did so yesterday morning. In the afternoon I was pressed to write down and print my

Wesley was a *homo unius libri* did not mean that he held to a narrow view of *sola Scriptura*; rather, he accorded a fundamental status to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed as both “a summary of the biblical faith” and as an interpretive web “for the reading of Scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> Not only did Wesley affirm the trinitarian creeds as valid summaries of his theological position, he recognized their didactic value as vital components of the worship life of ordinary “simple Methodists.” This is nowhere more clearly exemplified than in the trinitarian hymnody of the Wesley brothers.

## **Multifaceted Wesleyan Hymnody: An Explicit Trinitarian Ontology<sup>24</sup>**

The Wesley brothers first published an anthology of twenty-four hymns under the title of *Gloria Patri...or Hymns on the Trinity* (1746) followed by 188 more in *Hymns on the Trinity* (1767).<sup>25</sup> These hymns, as B. Bryant observes, were published as an intentional counter-attack against Unitarianism and also as a didactic tool to teach Nicene trinitarianism and metrical theology to the Methodist societies.<sup>26</sup> In 1780, John Wesley published *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* containing 525 hymns, mostly written by Charles with only a handful by himself.<sup>27</sup> The hymns in the *Collection* were by “the hand of Charles, but the voice was the voice of John.” Here, it might be useful to cite O. Beckerlegge’s comments on John’s role as the editor:

It was John who conceived the whole *Collection*... Conception, arrangement, choice, revision, were all his. On the whole work he stamped the impress of his own personality to such an extent that the hymn-book became the supreme vehicle of his teaching, so that in afteryears, when hymn-books frequently bore the spine ‘Wesley’s Hymns’, or simply ‘Wesley’, it was John and not Charles of whom the owner thought.<sup>28</sup>

T. Berger argues convincingly that Charles Wesley’s soteriological emphasis in the hymns has been doubly reinforced by the ordering principle – the experiential *ordo salutis* or the faith-journey of the individual Christian – which John utilized as

sermon; if possible before I left Cork. I have wrote it this morning: but I must beg the reader to make allowance for the disadvantages I am under, as I have not here any books to consult, nor indeed any time to consult them.” See “On the Trinity,” in *Works* 2, 374.

<sup>23</sup> Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” 33.

<sup>24</sup> Although I am aware of W. Jean Quantrille’s unpublished Ph.D dissertation entitled *The Triune God in the Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Madison, NJ: Drew University, 1989), I have not attempted to include this in my analysis as it is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> None of the hymns published in *Gloria Patri... or Hymns on the Trinity* is included in the *Collection*. The second work was published as a one-volume work, comprising 136 hymns in *Hymns on the Trinity*, together with 52 additional hymns, “Hymns and Prayers on the Trinity.” See Barry E. Bryant, “Trinity and Hymnody: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Hymns of Charles Wesley,” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 25/2 (Fall 1990), 65.

<sup>26</sup> Bryant, 65-66.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver A. Beckerlegge, “Introduction,” *Works* 7, 28.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 56.

editor of the *Collection*.<sup>29</sup> While the hymns, like most of John's sermons, focus on the biblical, practical and experiential aspects of Christianity, the "speculative" or doctrinal dimension is not absent.<sup>30</sup> John himself in the "Preface" to the *Collection* makes this fact clear:

It is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether *speculative* or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and reason. The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity... In what other publication of the kind have you so distinct and full an account of scriptural Christianity? Such a declaration of the heights and depths of religion, *speculative* and practical? (emphasis mine)<sup>31</sup>

### **Creedal and Prayer Book trinitarianism**

The specifically trinitarian hymns and the trinitarian grammar of the *Collection* in general can be attributed to the Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican tradition, as Charles and John were sons of an "establishment Anglican clergyman."<sup>32</sup> In addition to the frequent allusions to "Prayer Book Version of the Psalter, and occasionally of most other sections in the book, especially Communion, but also the Litany, the Collects, Baptism, Matrimony, and Burial, including versifications of the General Thanksgiving,"<sup>33</sup> commentators have noted the Wesleys' indebtedness to the ecumenical Creeds of the Prayer Book.

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<sup>29</sup> Teresa Berger, *Theology in Hymns? A Study of the Relationship of Doxology and Theology According to A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (1780)* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books and Abingdon Press, 1995), 68-74; 108. Berger argues that the structural principle of Wesley's *Collection* is not unlike that of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as it is very much "the poetical biography of a Christian."

<sup>30</sup> While Wesley makes a distinction between the "speculative" and "practical/experiential," he certainly does not see a separation, that is, a contrast between the rational and the active/affective. As Gregory S. Clapper has convincingly argued, Wesley's affective "heart" theology does not posit a disjunction between thinking, doing and feeling. Although Wesley had little regard for autonomous rationalism and philosophical speculation, he understood grace to perfect nature: "Knowing religion was not designed to destroy any of our natural faculties, but to exalt and improve them, our reason in particular." This citation is from Wesley's commentary on 1 Cor. 14:20, as quoted by Clapper in *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His View on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, "The Preface," *Works* 7, 74. While there are times when Wesley uses the term "speculative" pejoratively to indicate a mere intellectual assent to notions disjointed from the whole person, it is clear from the succeeding lines that he refers to doctrinal truth here. Note his following questions: "So strong cautions against the most plausible errors, particularly those that are now most prevalent? [the speculative] And so clear directions for making our calling and election sure, for perfecting holiness in the fear of God? [the practical]" There is, therefore, a place in Wesley's thought for speculation rooted in revelation and tradition, as opposed to mere speculation, as the former ensures orthodoxy, which must lead to orthopraxis and orthopathy (or orthokardia, as Clapper terms it). See Clapper, 154-156.

<sup>32</sup> David L. Jeffrey, ed., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 200.

<sup>33</sup> Franz Hilderbrandt, "Introduction," *Works* 7, 5, n. 3.

## Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

As B. Bryant reminds us, Wesley not only uses the terms “substance” and “person” to denote the concepts of *homoousia* and *hypostasis*, but the economic role of each Person and the notion of the immanent Trinity so crucial in Nicaea (325) are all recapitulated in these hymns.<sup>34</sup> The “triadic” framework and ordering of the Creed, which echoes the “triadic” passages in the New Testament,<sup>35</sup> is also evident in some of the Wesleyan hymns:

1 Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
 God, your Maker, asks you why...  
 2 Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
 God, your Saviour, asks you why...  
 3 Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
 God the Spirit asks you why... [C 6.1.1-2; 6.2.9-10; 6.3.17-18]<sup>36</sup>

When one sings “Thou art the co-eternal Son, / In substance with the Father one” [C 245.2], one hears echoes of the christological affirmation in the Nicene Creed, “being of one substance with the Father.” The soteriological emphasis of the Creed, especially the atonement, is also echoed in many of the hymns since, as Wainwright stresses, the Trinity is “both the origin and goal of soteriology.”<sup>37</sup> There is, therefore, no knowledge or experience of the Trinity without the person and work of the Son:

4 But only he who feels  
 “My saviour died for me”,  
 Is sure that all the Godhead dwells  
 Eternally in thee. [C 244.4]

The pneumatological grammar of the Creed is also appropriated: “Giver and Lord of life, whose power/ And guardian care for all are free” [C 227.2.1-2]. And, standing stoutly within the Augustinian-Latin tradition, the *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed, which maintains the double procession of the Holy Spirit, is lyrically expressed: “We the Spirit receive/ That proceeds from the Father and Son” [C 476.3.17-18].<sup>38</sup>

## Athanasian Creed

While Wesley initially had doubts about the ‘damnatory clauses’ in the Athanasian Creed, and though he would “insist upon no explication at all” of the fact

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<sup>34</sup> Bryant, 67.

<sup>35</sup> As Wainwright points out, the early Church established the doctrine of the Trinity in three fundamental ways: (1) Asserting the pre-existent divinity of Christ, who is *homoousios* with the Father (2) the “triadic” passages in the New Testament (3) the baptismal practice in the threefold Name. See Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” 29-32.

<sup>36</sup> [C x.y.z.] = [Collections hymn.stanza.line]. All hymns follow the order of Wesley’s 1780 edition found in *Works* 7.

<sup>37</sup> Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” 35.

<sup>38</sup> See the Nicene Creed: “And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, The Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son.”



of the Trinity, he however regarded the Creed as “the best [explication] I ever saw.”<sup>39</sup> Many of the trinitarian hymns in the *Collection* paraphrase the substance of the Creed, which affirms the antinomy between the one essence and three persons of the Trinity: “One inexplicably Three, One in simplest unity” [C 252.3.9-10], “One undivided Trinity” [C 251.2.5], “A mystical plurality” [C 248.2.5]. From the *Collection* alone, it is possible to extract and creatively order various verses of the Wesleyan hymnody into a cogent whole that reflects the essential teachings of the trinitarian portion of the Athanasian Creed:

Adoring One in Persons Three,  
 And Three in nature One. [C 248.2.7-8; *Athanasian Creed* 3]  
 A Trinity in Unity [C 249.4.13; A 3]  
 Three uncompounded Persons One,  
 One undivided God proclaim [C 255.2.5-6; A 4]  
 One Person of the Sire we praise,  
 Another of the Son adore,  
 Another of the Spirit confess, [C 255.3.9-11; A 5]  
 Equal in majesty and power. [C 255.3.12; A 6]  
 To each the glory appertains,  
 The Godhead of the Three in One; [C 255.4.13-14; A 6]  
 The Father, Son, and Spirit of love,  
 One uncreated God we hail! [C 255.5.17-18; A 8]  
 Supreme, essential One, adored  
 In co-eternal Three! [C 251.6.23-24; A 10]  
 The Father is both God and Lord;  
 Both God and Lord is Christ the Son;  
 The Holy Ghost, the glorious Third,  
 Both God and Lord his people own. [C 255.7; A 15, 17]  
 Both God and Lord, who him believe,  
 Each Person by himself we name:  
 Yet not three Gods or Lords receive, [C 255.8.29-31; A 19, 20]  
 Blessing, and honour, praise, and love,  
 Co-equal, co-eternal Three. [C 227.3.17-18; A 26, 27]

An important ontological assertion implicit to the Creed of St. Athanasius is that the three divine Persons within their eternal self-life are designated Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These are the proper divine names at the fundamental level of being, and the hymns of Wesley are replete with such declarations:

Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
 One God in Persons Three; [C 229.1.1-2]  
 Thee Father, Son, and Spirit of grace,  
 One glorious God in Persons Three [C 230.1.6-7]

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<sup>39</sup> Wesley, “On the Trinity,” in *Works* 2, 376-377. With regard to the damnatory clauses, Wesley had this to say: “I am far from saying, he who does not assent to this ‘shall without doubt perish everlastingly’. For the sake if that and another clause I for some time scrupled subscribing to that creed, till I considered, (1), that these sentences only relate to *wilful*, not involuntary believers... (2), that they relate only to the *substance* of the doctrine there delivered, not the philosophical *illustrations* of it.”

Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
One God in Persons Three! [C 243.1.1-2]

All other designations are attributes (for example Power, Wisdom or Goodness) or economic roles (for instance Maker, Redeemer, or Sanctifier) that may be appropriated to distinct persons while affirming their common energy, will and operation *ad extra*. T. Pillow reminds us that Wesley's tendency to emphasize the "experienced, distinct functions for the persons of the Trinity" must be seen in his equally strong stress on the "unity and coinherence of the three person of the Trinity."<sup>40</sup> The doctrine of appropriations,<sup>[41]</sup> where an attribute or function is preeminently assigned to a distinct person of the Trinity, is usually affirmed together with the axiom "*opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*" – the external works of the Trinity are undivided. The latter formulary is usually ascribed to Augustine but the substance of its affirmation is common in Greek patristic writings, also.<sup>42</sup> To affirm a common operation of the Trinity at the economic level is to reiterate that the three Persons are ontologically united within the immanent Trinity.

As such, the Athanasian Creed clarifies the first statement of the Nicene Creed – "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible." This Creed, and the First, Second and Fifth Articles of Religion set the necessary context for the Prayer Book Catechism where the titles of maker, redeemer and sanctifier must be viewed as roles appropriated to the Father, Son and Spirit respectively.<sup>43</sup> Creation, salvation and sanctification are, therefore, trinitarian acts although the Incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit are proper to the distinct persons.

## The Trinity as a Revealed Mystery

Wesley certainly did not utilize "the quaint device of styling" the three divine Persons as "three offices" and the *Collections* testify to that fact. The person of the Father is not reduced to the role of the Maker as Wesley also refers to the Word of God as Creator, who dies for the created: "Christ the whole creation made" [C

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<sup>40</sup> Pillow, 8. See also, Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," 39-40.

<sup>41</sup> Willam J. Hill explains clearly the classical theory of appropriations: "What is in reality a common prerogative of the trinitarian members is predicated of one alone to manifest his personal uniqueness in the Godhead. But this cannot be done arbitrarily; some mysterious affinity between person and an action *ad extra*, or an essential attribute, lies at the base of this kind of speech." See *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 283.

<sup>42</sup> The affirmation of a single energy, operation and will of the Trinity is a primary axiom in Cappadocian triadology. See Kallistos Ware, "The Trinity: Heart of Our Life," in James S. Cutsinger, ed., *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics & Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 139. See also, Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," 39-40.

<sup>43</sup> See Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," 39. "First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world. Secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind. Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God." See also, *Book of Common Prayer*.

224.2.8] and “Come see, ye worms, your Maker die” [C 27.2.9].<sup>44</sup> Wesley is also unambiguous in his affirmation of the indwelling of the Spirit as the proper mission of the third divine Person, without denying the trinitarian context of this divine Gift:<sup>45</sup>

7 Father, behold we claim  
The gift in Jesu's name!  
Him the promised Comforter  
Into all our spirits pour;  
Let him fix his mansion here,  
Come, and never leave us more! [C 86.7]

One can do no better than to cite “Hymn 248,” where the trinitarian work of creation, redemption and glorification is poeticized:

4 Thy powerful, wise, and loving mind  
Did our creation plan,  
And all the glorious Persons joined  
To form thy fav'rite, man.

5 Again, thou didst, in council met,  
Thy ruined work restore,  
Established in our first estate  
To forfeit it no more.

6 And when we rise in love renewed,  
Our souls resemble thee,  
An image of the Triune God  
To all eternity. [C 248.4-6]

We see no “hidden tritheism” here even though Wesley clearly employs covenant theology grammar of the Reformed-Puritan tradition for though “all the glorious Persons joined” and “in council met,” yet the eternal Three contrived their external works as a single “powerful, wise and loving mind.”<sup>46</sup> There is, of course, “Hymn 253” where the distinction and unity of the Persons, and their works, are both artfully and subtly brought across:

1 Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Whom one all-perfect God we own,  
Restorer of thine image lost,

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<sup>44</sup> S.T. Kimborough suggests that “Hymn 27” encapsulates Charles Wesley’s “death-of-God theology.” He also notes that the editorial change of “Maker” to “Saviour” in revisions of this hymn “radically and wrongly” alters Charles Wesley’s intention. See, S. T. Kimborough, Jr., *A Heart to Praise My God: Wesley Hymns for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 145.

<sup>45</sup> We should note that although Wesley was unequivocal in his assertion of the consubstantiality of the divine Persons, he also affirmed an ontological *taxis* within the Trinity, which is mirrored in his “monarchical” trinitarian ordering – this is evident not only in this particular hymn but also in most of his other trinitarian hymns. Hence, the Father comes first, as he is the principle without a principle, the Son next since he is the principle from a principle, and the Spirit last as he proceeds from both.

<sup>46</sup> This is evident in Hymn 418, too: “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,/ One in Three, and Three in One/...Let thy will on earth be done...” See Wesley, *Collections* 418.1.1, 2 & 4.

Thy various offices make known;  
 Display, our fallen souls to raise,  
 Thy whole economy of grace.

2 Jehovah in Three Persons, come,  
 And draw, and sprinkle us, and seal  
 Poor guilty, dying worms, in whom  
 Thy dost eternal life reveal;  
 The knowledge of thyself bestow,  
 And all thy glorious goodness show.

The ontological unity of “Jehovah” – “one all-perfect God” – and the essential distinctions of the “Three Persons” – “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” – are made clear in the beginning verses of both stanzas.<sup>47</sup> The economic Trinity, Wesley goes on to affirm, is the very self-revelation of the immanent Trinity and this is reflected in their distinct – “Thy *various offices* make known” – and common workings – “Thy *whole economy* of grace.”<sup>48</sup>

In Stanza Two, the distinct economic roles of the divine Persons are aptly indicated: the Father draws, the Son sprinkles and the Spirit seals. However, the interpretation of the last three lines is ambiguously open. Is “eternal life”, divine “knowledge” and “glorious goodness” attributed to the Father who reveals, the Son who bestows and the Spirit who shows, respectively? In other words, is Wesley situating himself within the tradition of Augustine, subsequently developed by Bonaventure, of appropriating the attributes of power, knowledge and goodness to the three divine Persons? Or do the salvific benefits of divine life, knowledge and goodness come from the one Jehovah God? These rhetorical questions do not engender mutually exclusive answers, we contend, as the content and form of Wesley’s hymns on the Trinity allow for (and perhaps, necessitate) both interpretations.

Herein lie the genius and artistry of Wesleyan trinitarian hymnody, for the paradoxical mystery of the “Three-One God” is acknowledged as divine revelation – at both the immanent and the economic levels. It shows that the profundity of the doctrine does not necessarily demand the use of esoteric, sophisticated, and precise grammar found in technical theological treatises. On the contrary, these hymns, meant for ordinary Methodists, by virtue of their lyrical, symbolic nature permit a “thick” description of the trinitarian mystery in simple language. As such, the trinitarian

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<sup>47</sup> In Stanza One of Hymn 248, Wesley reiterates this point: “Hail, Father, Son, and Spirit, great/ Before the birth of time, Enthroned in everlasting state,/ Jehovah, Elohim!” See *Collections* 248.1.

<sup>48</sup> Here, Wesley would certainly affirm the first half of the Rahnerian axiom – “the economic trinity is the immanent trinity” – since he understood God’s action in history to be none other than the free self-revelation and self-communication of Father, Son and Spirit. However, surely true self-disclosure does not presuppose full self-disclosure, and the eternal, “natural” and “necessary” processions of the divine persons function at a different level from their mission of creating, redeeming and glorifying human beings by God’s free will? Hence, can one equally affirm, with Rahner, that “the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity”; on this point, see Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), Vol. 3, Part One, I:2, 11-17. Not according to Wesley, for even in the beatific vision, this divine Trinity is still an uncreated mystery: “The Father, Son, and Spirit of love,/ One uncreated God we hail!/Not fully known by saints above,/ To us incomprehensible.” See *Collections* 255.5.

hymnody of John and Charles Wesley reflects the didactic and doxological intent of the ecumenical creeds, and rightly so, since they contributed to much of the theological content of the hymns in the first place.

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