

## The Path to Perfection in Pseudo-Macarius and John Wesley

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**Abstract:** John Wesley read Macarius' *Homilies* no later than 30 July 1736. He probably read them in a German translation provided by one of his pietist friends. Wesley was deeply impressed. He tried to give Macarius' ideas a wider circulation by publishing portions of his *Homilies* in the *Christian Library*. In 1736, however, Macarius helped Wesley to clarify his attitude toward "mysticism" and reinforced some of his cherished ideas regarding Christian perfection.

JOHN WESLEY IS BEST-KNOWN AS A MISSIONARY to the British Isles and as the principal founder of the Methodist movement. The sermon which he preached to the colliers of Kingswood in April 1739 marks the beginning of his career as an itinerant evangelist. Between 1739 and the year of his death, 1791, Wesley travelled over 250,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 sermons. He and his associates left behind a network of Methodist societies and congregations, located in Great Britain, Ireland, and the Western Hemisphere.

This essay refers to an earlier period in Wesley's life, prior to the beginning of his itinerant ministry. This period comprises Wesley's under-graduate career at Christ Church, Oxford (1720-4); his ordination as deacon and priest, in 1725 and 1728 respectively; his teaching as Fellow of Lincoln College (1726-35); and his residence in Georgia (1735-7), where he served as missionary to the Indians and minister to the village of Savannah, supported in part by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

My interest here turns upon three events which occurred during these years:

(i) In 1725, while still residing in Oxford, Wesley made certain resolutions; according to some, this was his first "conversion". Having read Thomas à Kempis and Jeremy Taylor, he resolved to seek inward as well as outward holiness and to obey all of the commandments of God. William Law's books, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* and *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection*, as well as correspondence with his father, the Rev Samuel Wesley Sr., reinforced these resolutions.

In the University sermon which he preached on 1 January 1733, the younger Wesley connected, for the first time in public, the call to inward holiness and the pursuit of perfection.

(ii) Beginning in 1732, or thereabouts, Wesley began to practise a form of contemplative prayer and to seek a greater measure of solitude. Contemplation and solitude were key elements in what he came to call "mysticism".

(iii) While continuing to pursue perfection as his goal, Wesley turned against "mysticism" no later than 23 November 1736. He had been reading Macarius' *Spiritual Homilies* not long before (30-31 July 1736). In my judgement, Macarius helped Wesley to clarify his ideas regarding "mysticism" and to chart an alternative path to perfection.

I turn now to consider these points in greater detail.

Towards the close of his life, Wesley described Christian perfection as "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up".<sup>1</sup> One may ask what he meant by perfection. While Wesley said that Christian perfection entails the love of God and the knowledge of God, he assigns the primary place to love. Thus he can say that the Great Commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and mind" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self", "contain the whole of Christian perfection".<sup>2</sup> The love of God is the Christian's prayer, using the word "prayer" in a comprehensive sense. The perfect man, Wesley writes, has "a heart so all-flaming with the love of God...as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work, as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable unto God through Christ".<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the "mind" "which was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5) characterises the perfected person. This phrase refers primarily to the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), which was defaced by the sin of Adam and is being restored by the Holy Spirit. The word "mind" can refer to the intentions or inward dispositions of the perfected Christian. However, it also stands for an experiential knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup> Therefore Wesley says, citing 1 John 1:3, the perfected person has fellowship "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ".<sup>5</sup> Wesley describes this relationship in a variety of ways, such as God dwelling within the soul, union with the Divine Being, and the vision of God.

1. John Telford (ed.), *The letters of The Rev John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth Press, 1931) 8:238. Hereafter the abbreviation JWL will be used for this collection.

2. A.C. Outler (ed.), *The works of John Wesley*, vols 1-4, *Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-7) 3:74. Hereafter the abbreviation SER will be used for this edition of Wesley's sermons.

3. *The works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872) 11:384. Hereafter the abbreviation JWW will be used for this edition of Wesley's works.

4. SER, 1:497.

5. SER, 1:408, 497, 513.

Perfection is both a process and a state. The Christian moves, step by step, from lower to higher degrees of holiness. These steps are symbolised by the rungs on a ladder or by the stages of human development, such as infant, young man and parent. Wesley employs a concept of "relative" perfection. The individual who acts with the purest of intentions, and obeys all of the commandments which he knows, is said to be "perfect". Wesley says that all Christians can be perfected in this life, using the word "perfection" in a relative sense.

Wesley's perfectionism was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it was part of a larger movement within the Church of England. The Prayer Book itself provided an opening. Wesley did not fail to quote the collect which stands at the beginning of the 1662 Communion Service: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy Name...." Perfectionist teaching was not confined to a single party within the Church. I have already mentioned a High Churchman, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, and the Non-Juror, William Law. Professors Spellman and Spurr have noted that the Latitudinarian divines also preached that perfection is the goal of the Christian life.<sup>6</sup> Even the most "liberal" of Anglicans, men such as David Hartley, the psychologist and philosopher, described perfection in theistic terms and commended the pursuit of perfection to their readers.

The advocates of perfection asked themselves, where can we find judicious interpretations of the doctrine, and models of holy living? As good Anglicans, they looked first to the Bible for answers and then to the primitive Church. The way in which late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Anglicans defined the phrase, "primitive Church", is significant, since it set a limit to their reading of the Fathers. In contrast to earlier and later Anglicans, who often defined "primitive" as the first five centuries of the Christian era, the Anglicans of this period thought in terms of the ante-Nicene church, or perhaps the period extending to the middle of the fourth century or so. Wesley usually accepted the first

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6. W. M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 113, 115, 119-20; John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 306. Further evidence regarding the Anglican commitment to perfection comes from Wesley's own career. As stated above, Wesley described perfection as he understood it in his 1 January 1733 sermon, "Circumcision of the Heart". This sermon was favourably received by the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, William Holmes, and by the Rector of Lincoln College, Euseby Isham ("Introductory Comment", *SER*, 1:399). The Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, interviewed Wesley towards the close of 1740. Gibson asked Wesley to explain his doctrine of Christian perfection. The bishop not only approved Wesley's doctrine; he declared it to be irrefutable (*JWW*, 11:374).

three centuries only, although he stretched a point to include Macarius and Ephraem Syrus.<sup>7</sup>

These remarks lead to the groups which Wesley remembered later as the earliest Methodist societies. Beginning in 1729, small groups of persons drawn from several Oxford colleges, and from the city of Oxford itself, met week by week for prayer, Biblical study, and religious conversation.<sup>8</sup> Some but not all of these groups were under the leadership of John Wesley. He and his associates justified their actions by appealing to the early Church, hence his nickname, "Primitive Christianity". The life-style of certain Methodists might be described as "semi-monastic".<sup>9</sup> They controlled their hours of sleep and fasted regularly, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays. They also identified themselves with the poor, limiting their personal expenditures in order to educate children who could not afford schooling and to assist debtors who were held in the Oxford city jail.

The Oxford Methodists took seriously the Apostle's admonition, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). In order to maintain a round of prayer, Wesley devised a regular schedule for himself and others. He wove together two patterns of prayer, a series of short, personal prayers, characteristic of the Desert Fathers,<sup>10</sup> and a rota resembling the seven monastic hours. The sentences or ejaculations which the Methodists recited throughout the day, and the brief periods set aside for prayer prior to each meal, represent the first pattern. As for the second, the private prayers which the Methodists said upon rising and retiring correspond to Prime and Compline. They also read a collect apiece, again privately, at 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 p.m. Then they joined with other members of their colleges in what they called "public prayers", that is, the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer (Matins and Evensong). To complete the picture, Wesley and some of his associates took Communion each Sunday, either at Christ Church or in their college chapels. Given the fact that most eighteenth-century

7. *JWW*, 10:79; elsewhere Wesley refers to Chrysostom and Basil as well as Ephraem and Macarius (*SER*, 3:586).

8. For a finely-drawn picture of Oxford Methodism, see Richard P Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the people called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 33-58 and Heitzenrater's introduction to the *Diary of an Oxford Methodist: Benjamin Ingham, 1733-1734* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985) 6-38.

9. In my judgement, Albert Outler missed the mark when he said that Wesley "modeled the Holy Club on fourth-century monastic patterns as he had learned them from Macarius the Egyptian" (Thomas C. Oden and L. R. Longden (eds.), *The Wesleyan theological heritage* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991] 44). The disciplined life of work and prayer recommended by Wesley is reminiscent of monasticism, to be sure. One must recall, however, that Wesley had a thorough knowledge of the ante-Nicene Fathers; many of his ideas and practices are to be found in these authors. Furthermore, we have no concrete evidence that Macarius was on Wesley's reading list at Oxford.

10. Irénée Hausherr, "Comment priaient les Pères", *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 32 (1956) 285.

Anglicans rarely received the Sacrament, this practice is noteworthy in itself.

I come now to a further stage in Wesley's spiritual development. In 1732, Wesley writes, "A contemplative man instructed me how to pursue inward holiness, or a union of the soul with God." "He recommended...mental prayer, and the like exercises, as the most effectual means of purifying the soul and uniting it to God."<sup>11</sup> These statements present two problems, the identity of the "contemplative man" and the meaning of the phrase, "mental prayer". The "contemplative man" is usually taken to be William Law. Wesley conversed with Law on several occasions between 1732 and 1735. The interpretation of "mental prayer" is more difficult. Wesley uses but does not define the term in the context just cited. However, "mental prayer" is a feature of what he called "mysticism". Wesley abandoned mysticism, and thus mental prayer, in November 1736. The meaning of the phrase must be inferred from statements regarding the means of grace and the practice of prayer which Wesley made either at that time or in subsequent years.

Two preliminary points may be stated here. First, sometimes "meditation" and "mental prayer" are taken to be synonyms. This cannot be what Wesley means. He had begun to practise meditation before he met the "contemplative man". Secondly, Wesley distinguished between "vocal" and "mental" prayer.<sup>12</sup> This point may be more significant than it appears to be at first. Vocal prayer is sounded in song and speech; mental prayer is offered in silence. Furthermore, while mental prayer may refer to the silent rehearsal of a verbal formula, it need not involve the production of words at all.

In my judgement, Wesley's phrase, "mental prayer", refers to a form of "contemplation". The contemplative individual comes to know God in an especially profound manner, by means of prayer which is "entirely free from images, thoughts, and discourse", to quote Wesley himself.<sup>13</sup> This phrase could describe the type of prayer to be found in the authors whom Law recommended to Wesley in 1732. These men were Johann Tauler and the author of the *German theology*, both Dominican theologians who lived during the fourteenth century. One may also note that Wesley read Clement of Alexandria's *Miscellanies* (*Stromateis*) in December 1734. The description of the "gnostic" or perfected Christian to be found in Book VII of the *Miscellanies* made a

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11. Nehemiah Curnock, *The journal of The Rev John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth Press, 1938) 1:468, 469. Hereafter the abbreviation *JWJ* will be used for this edition of the Journal.

12. John Wesley, *Explanatory notes upon the New Testament*, Eph 6:18; exchange of correspondence between Mary Bishop and Wesley (*JWL*, 6:43-4); see also *JWW*, 8:343 (comment on "prayer of the heart").

13. *JWL*, 1:208.

great impression upon Wesley.<sup>14</sup> Clement's teaching might have reinforced that of Tauler and the *German theology*, since he refers to the "gnostic" Christian as a "contemplative".<sup>15</sup>

As noted above, Wesley rejected "mysticism" in November 1736. Who are the "mystics" to whom Wesley refers, we may ask, and to which part of their doctrine does he object? These individuals can be divided into three categories. The members of the first group are especially important, since they determined Wesley's attitude toward "mysticism". This group includes Tauler and the author of the *German theology*.<sup>16</sup> Both of these men quote Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom Wesley refers on one occasion.<sup>17</sup> Wesley adopts a discriminating attitude toward his second group; their work contains something of value, he declared. This category includes Madame Guyon, Miguel de Molinos, and Antoinette Bourignon. Jakob Boehme fills a category of his own. At a later point in his career, Wesley criticised Boehme severely. However, he paid little attention to his writings during the period covered by this paper.

Wesley criticised the "mystics" on many grounds. I have space to mention three of them.

(i) God has established certain "means" whereby he communicates his grace to humanity. The mystics, Wesley asserts, decline to use the means which God has established. Rather, they have invented their own means and they try, unsuccessfully, to reach God by depending upon them. According to Wesley, the means of grace comprise the sacrament of the Lord's Supper; "Christian conference"; fasting; reading and hearing the Scriptures; and certain types of prayer. Wesley cannot be saying that the mystics reject all of these means. He must refer to prayer and the Bible, taken together. The mystics, Wesley believes, denigrate the reading of Scripture in an attitude of prayer, that is, slowly and attentively, while waiting upon the Holy Spirit to illumine the text's meaning and draw the reader closer to Christ.

(ii) The mystics' account of religious experience is deficient, in Wesley's estimation. Notice his line of reasoning: if the Holy Spirit is present to an individual, he must, given the Spirit's power, "know" it. Wesley describes this knowledge in terms of "perception", "feeling", or

14. In his diary for December 1734, Wesley says that he was reading "Clemens Alexandrinus" (Richard P Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, 1725-35" [Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1972] 500). This is a reference, in part at least, to Book VII of the *Miscellanies*, as shown by a remark which Wesley made in 1768 (JWL, 5:43; see also JWJ, 5:197).

15. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom* VI, 9; VII, 7.

16. Tauler: JWJ, 1:175, 440; 2:467; JWW, 9:49; *German theology*: JWL, 1:207; JWJ, 1:137; 2:515.

17. JWJ, 2:365.

“consciousness”.<sup>18</sup> Then he says, the Spirit is at work continuously in the soul of the authentic Christian. In particular, the Spirit evokes and sustains faith, the condition of justification and of perfection in love. It follows, therefore, that the faithful person is constantly aware of God’s presence.

Consider now the account of spiritual “desolation” given by the mystics and Wesley. They agree that the Christian journeying toward perfection may lose “the emotional comfort of God’s closeness”.<sup>19</sup> How is this loss to be explained? Tauler and the *German theology* say that God chooses to withdraw his comfort from believers, in order to test their faith and to encourage their spiritual development. Wesley, on the other hand, insists that the responsibility lies with the individual. God does withdraw from the person who has sinned grievously. But to say that God deserts those who have given no offence calls God’s benevolence into question and implies that he has reneged on his covenant promises.<sup>20</sup>

(iii) Some of the metaphors which the mystics use to describe the Divine being and operations are offensive to Wesley. For example, Tauler mentions “the divine abyss, God in all his immensity”, and then he equates this abyss and the “divine darkness”. Dionysius the Areopagite refers to God as “Super-Essential Godhead”. Wesley rejects this description. He cannot accept, therefore, Dionysius’ metaphor, God is “Super-Essential Darkness”.<sup>21</sup> Underlying Wesley’s objection is a question of hermeneutics. Dionysius intended to base his theology upon the teachings of Scripture. He went astray, Wesley suggests, because he did not rest content with the literal or “plain” meaning of the text. Dionysius tried to dig beneath the surface and to uncover meanings which were hidden from view. He lost his way and became entangled in speculations which are unscriptural, that is, incongruent with the “plain” meaning of the words, and sometimes simply irrational.<sup>22</sup>

Pseudo-Macarius helped Wesley to re-evaluate the kind of “mysticism” which I have been describing. He also reinforced some of Wesley’s cherished ideas regarding Christian perfection. “Macarius” is the pseudonym of a monk active between the years 380 and 430, who lived in Syria or Asia Minor. A number of works are attributed to him, including a collection of fifty “spiritual homilies”. Wesley and his

18. For perception: *JWL*, 1:20; *SER*, 2:160-1; feeling: *JWW*, 8:49; 11:379; consciousness: *SER*, 1:273.

19. Tauler, sermon 21, fourth sermon for Ascension Day.

20. *SER*, 2:208, 212.

21. Tauler, sermon 28, first sermon for Trinity Sunday; Dionysius, *The Divine names*, chapter 1; *Mystical theology*, chapter 2; *JWJ*, 2:365.

22. On the dangers of departing from the plain meaning, see *JWW*, 11:429. On the “unscriptural speculations” of the mystics, see *JWJ*, 5:46.

contemporaries believed that these homilies had been written by Macarius the Great, an important figure in early Egyptian monasticism. His dates are 301 to 391.

As stated earlier, Wesley lived abroad between 1735 and 1737. Among the persons whom he met in Georgia were two groups of German pietists, Moravian settlers led by Nitschmann and Spangenberg, and Halle pietists, including J. M. Bolzius and I. C. Gronau. Macarius' *Spiritual homilies* was popular in pietist circles. They were praised, for example, by Johann Arndt, P. J. Spener, and A. H. Francke. Gottfried Arnold and others translated them into German.<sup>23</sup> In all probability Wesley read the *Homilies* for the first time while he was living in Georgia and he read them in a German translation provided by one of his pietist friends.<sup>24</sup>

Macarius made a lasting impression upon Wesley. He refers to Macarius in a letter to Conyers Middleton, dated 24 January 1749, and in sermons delivered in 1765 and 1777. More significantly, Wesley published an abridgment of the *Homilies* for the use of the Methodist societies. This abridgment is based upon the English translation prepared by Thomas Heywood in 1721. Wesley's version appears in the first volume (1749) of his fifty volume *Christian library*.

What did Wesley find of value in Macarius? To begin with, he reinforced three ideas which Wesley already knew, namely,

- (i) the Christian is dependent upon the Holy Spirit at all times;
- (ii) persons of faith engage in constant prayer; and
- (iii) perfection in this life is possible.<sup>25</sup>

In my estimation, however, the aspect of Macarius which Wesley found most appealing was his account of the Christian's knowledge of God. The Greek words which Wesley used to describe this knowledge, principally *aisthesis* and *peira*, connote immediacy, affectivity, and certainty. They are usually translated by terms such as "sensation", "perception", and "consciousness". *Aisthesis* and *peira* are related to faith as a way of knowing. Sometimes Macarius refers to the operations of the Holy Spirit. Faith makes it possible for individuals to know that the Spirit is at work within their souls. "They perceive, day after day, an

23. Ernst Benz has described Macarius' influence upon German pietists of various types (*Die Protestantische Thebais: zur Nachwirkung Makarios des Ägypters in Protestantismus des 17 und 18. Jahrhunderts in Europa und Amerika* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1963) 9-116).

24. The arguments in favour of these conclusions cannot be rehearsed in the space allotted to this paper. Wesley had at least been introduced to Macarius before he left England. An English translation of homily 45 is to be found in *Reliquiae Ludolfianae: the pious remains of Henry William Ludolph* (London: 1712), which Wesley read in 1734. He knew German, so he would be able to read a German translation of Macarius.

25. One must be careful not to overstate the case. In his *Spiritual homilies* 8. 4, Macarius says that perfection can and has been attained. He denies this, however, in *Spiritual homilies* 8. 5. Elsewhere he makes the point differently: freedom from sin is possible in this life (*Spiritual homilies* 10. 2; 17. 11).



experimental sense [*aisthesis*] of their advances" toward Christ the Bridegroom.<sup>26</sup> At other times, Macarius refers specifically to God as Love. Faith is that knowledge of God as merciful and gracious which evokes trust or confidence in him. As the individual's confidence in the Divine mercy increases, a confidence which God gives to those who pray without ceasing, so does the person's knowledge of heavenly realities.

Macarius uses the word *plerophoria*, "fullness" or "assurance", to refer to the highest degree of faith.<sup>27</sup> *Plerophoria*, in turn, is related to the idea of perfection. The individuals who have complete confidence in the Divine mercy are described as "perfect". God is the centre of their attention; lesser realities do not distract them. They know the risen Christ in a particularly compelling manner.<sup>28</sup> What really interests Macarius, however, is the perfect love which these individuals manifest.<sup>29</sup> He concludes,

When a person reaches the perfection of the Spirit, completely purified of all passions and united to and interpenetrated by the Paraclete Spirit in an ineffable communion...then it [the soul] becomes all light, all eye, all spirit, all joy, all repose, all happiness, all love, all compassion, all goodness and kindness.<sup>30</sup>

While Macarius does say at one point that the "lamp of grace" may be veiled temporarily (not extinguished),<sup>31</sup> the concept of spiritual "desolation", symbolised by darkness, plays only a small part in the *Spiritual homilies*. Rather, Macarius uses darkness, and its opposite, light, in ways which Wesley would find congenial. Certain terms go together in the writings of both men. The metaphor of "darkness" stands for Satan, the demonic powers, sin and evil, bondage, ignorance, the ugly, disproportion, and dissonance. "Light", on the other hand, represents God, the angels, righteousness, liberty, knowledge, beauty, and harmony.

Wesley read Macarius' *Homilies* no later than 30 July 1736. He probably read them in a German translation provided by one of his pietist friends. Wesley was deeply impressed. He tried to give Macarius' ideas a wider circulation by publishing portions of his *Homilies* in the *Christian library*. In 1736, however, Macarius helped Wesley to clarify his attitude toward "mysticism" and reinforced some of his cherished ideas regarding Christian perfection.

26. *Spiritual homilies* 10. 1 (Thomas Heywood's translation). The following book, to which I am deeply indebted, is a thorough study of the Greek terms mentioned in the text of this paper: Columba Stewart, *"Working the earth of the heart": the Messalian controversy in history, texts, and language to AD 431* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

27. *Spiritual homilies* 9. 3, 5, 6.

28. *Spiritual homilies* 15. 20; see 17. 4.

29. *Spiritual homilies* 28. 5; see also 26. 15. 16; 27. 14.

30. *Spiritual homilies* 18. 10 (George A. Maloney's translation).

31. *Spiritual homilies* 8. 2.