

## **A Methodist Before Methodism**

### **The Wesleyan Reception of James Arminius**

By

Andrew V. Sullivan

#### **Introduction**

For most of Methodism's history, the Arminian soteriological system, (i.e., a particular system of thought concerning *the way to heaven* generally termed *Arminianism*) held sway in Wesleyan theology. Not only was this theological system the dominant force in Methodist thinking, but the Methodists also exceeded all others in promulgating and refining this theology.

James Arminius was born in the Netherlands in 1560. He received his seminary training in Geneva Switzerland by Theodore Beza, the direct successor of John Calvin. He returned to the Netherlands to pastor churches and eventually became a professor of theology at the University of Leiden. During his illustrious career as both pastor and professor, Arminius rebelled against the hard Predestinarianism of the Calvinists. Upon his death in 1609, his followers became known as the Remonstrants, and they continued his fight against Calvinism leading to their expulsion from the Netherlands by the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). Some important, but now forgotten theological giants, who valiantly fought on behalf of Arminianism are Simon Episcopius, Johannes Uytenbogaert, Nicholas Grevinchovius, Hugo Grotius, and Johannes Corvinus.

After their expulsion, and due to multiple reasons, the theology of the Remonstrants began to change. Eventually, Remonstrant theology would deteriorate into a Semi-Pelagian, Rationalistic and even Proto-Liberal theology. However, across the English Channel, theologians in the Church of England were debating the same issues as the Calvinists and Arminians were in the Netherlands. Various theologians in the Church of England, through their own independent studies of the Bible, the writings of the Early Church Fathers, and influence from Philip Melancthon, came to the same conclusions as the Early Dutch Arminians. Some, such as Peter Baro (1534-1599) of Cambridge University, even predate James Arminius. Naturally, Arminian Anglican theologians began to read, be influenced by, and some even directly correspond with,

the Remonstrants. However, due to multiple reasons, Arminianism in the Church of England would deteriorate into a Semi-Pelagian, or even full blown Pelagian, Rationalistic theology. Some Arminian theologians in the Church of England such as Daniel Whitby or Bishop George Bull are more properly Anti-Calvinists than they are true Arminians. Some important, but now forgotten theological giants, who valiantly fought on behalf of Arminianism are Bishop Laurence Womack, John Plaifere, Thomas Jackson, Henry Hammond and Daniel Waterland.

Due to the small size of the Remonstrant church, and the fast pace in which they fell, it was not the original Dutch Arminians who would have a long-lasting impact on the formation of Arminian theology. But neither were the Anglicans who, due to the wildly different theologies that co-exist within the Church of England, able to secure a long-lasting Orthodox Arminianism. It is not until the arrival of John Wesley, that a true Orthodox and Evangelical Arminianism would breathe new life.

It is to John Wesley and the Methodists that Arminianism found its greatest champions and its greatest promulgators. While greatly influenced by his own High Church Anglicanism, by Lutheran Pietism and even Puritan theology, it is the Arminian system that John Wesley self-identified with. In the *Minutes Controversy of the 1770s*, a controversy between the Arminian followers of John Wesley and the Calvinistic followers of the Rev. George Whitefield who had just passed away, John Wesley, Thomas Olivers, Walter Sellon, and most of all, John William Fletcher, valiantly defended the Arminian theological system of grace and works, of faith and holiness. This controversy saw the expulsion of Calvinism from Methodist circles. The Calvinistic followers of Whitefield would eventually form their own Calvinistic Methodist Church in Wales, but that movement remained small, and in time, they simply became Presbyterians.

In 1778, John Wesley founded the *Arminian Magazine*. In it he published the funeral sermon of James Arminius, given by Arminius' close friend and ally, Peter Bertius.<sup>1</sup> The *Arminian Magazine* would also publish a portrait of James Arminius, portraits of Episcopius and Uytenbogaert, a history on the Synod of Dort by a Remonstrant minister, and numerous

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<sup>1</sup> This is found in the very first volume of the *Arminian Magazine*; indeed, it is the very first article.

polemical tracts by pro-Arminian Anglicans.<sup>2</sup> The positive reception of Arminius among Methodists would continue throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Translating Arminius into English

In 1792, the *Arminian Magazine* published a summary of Arminius' views on predestination entitled, *The Judgement of Arminius Touching the Divine Decrees*.<sup>3</sup> Miles Martindale, an early Methodist minister who had written an *Elegy on the Death of Wesley* in 1791, translated Arminius' *A Discourse on the Priesthood of Christ* into English in 1815.<sup>4</sup> This marks the first translation of Arminius into English by a Methodist theologian.

James Nichols, a pro-Arminian British book publisher, proud member of the Church of England, and himself a member of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection,<sup>5</sup> translated the *Works of*

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<sup>2</sup> The history of the Synod of Dort is an abridgment from *The History of the Reformation* by Gerhard Brandt, a Remonstrant Minister and it is the second article of the first volume following after Bertius' funeral oration. The various portraits are found in the 1781 edition (volume IV), they themselves likewise come from Brandt's *History*. The various pro-Arminian articles are extracts from a whole host of theologians in the Church of England, such as Bishop Womack, Plaifere and Whitby; they span numerous volumes in the *Arminian Magazine*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Arminian Magazine for the Year 1792. Consisting Chiefly of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption Volume XV.*, (London, UK: G. Paramore, 1792) XV: 1-5. According to the editors in the preface, the work is from Tobias Conyers' 1655 English translation of Arminius. (This then, is Arminius' *Declaration of Sentiments*).

<sup>4</sup> Arminius, James and Miles Martindale, *A Discourse on the Priesthood of Christ by James Arminius, D.D. delivered in Latin, A.D. 1603, at Leyden, on the day of his promotion to the theological chair in the university of that city; translated from the Latin works of that eminent divine, by Miles Martindale*, (York, UK: H. Hangrove, 1815)

For a brief biography of the Rev. Martindale, see: Martindale, Miles "A Short Account of Mr. Miles Martindale, Preacher of the Gospel," *The Arminian Magazine for the Year 1797 Consisting Chiefly of Extracts and Original Treatises on General Redemption, Volume XX*, (London, UK: [Publisher Unknown], 1797) XX: 3-9.

<sup>5</sup> James Nichols recounts about himself the following: "I was in this doubtful state of mind respecting the unedifying subject of ecclesiastical regimen, when *I joined the society of the Wesleyan Methodists, in which my maternal grandfather had been one of the earliest Itinerant Ministers, and of which my pious parents had long been members*. Soon afterwards, a most liberal offer was made to me of a partnership in the bookselling business... Having now been settled some years as a printer in London, and entirely unconnected with any other religious denomination than that of the Church of England...my first fruits and earliest offerings in behalf of that Church in which I was the first captivated with the loveliness of religion, may seem to be of too polemical a character to be acceptable. But those who are best acquainted with me, know, that controversy is not the element in which I delight. The rise of Arminianism, however, in the Church of England, and its subsequent obligations to that of Holland, could not be elucidated without controverting many of the reproachful and untrue accounts of its most bitter adversaries..." (emphasis added). It should be noted that at this time, British Methodists had not yet separated from the Church of England like their American counterparts. Thus, members of the early Methodist societies were still (proud) members of the Church of England. Nichols, James, *Calvinism and Arminianism Compared in their Principles and Tendency or, the Doctrine of General Redemption, as held by the Members of the Church of England, and by the Early Dutch Arminians Exhibited in their Scriptural Evidence, and in their Connection with the Civil and Religious Liberties of Mankind*, (London, UK: James Nichols, 1824) I: clxvi-clxviii.

*James Arminius* in two volumes, in 1825 and 1828 respectively.<sup>6</sup> While Nichols' labors went unnoticed by the Church of England, Methodists in both England and America rejoiced at his work. Thus, in America, in the *Methodist Magazine* (1828), edited by Nathan Bangs and John Emroy, a one-page notice of Nicholas' publication along with an article defending Arminius against common accusations made against his theology was published.<sup>7</sup>

In England, the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, being the direct continuation of Wesley's original *Arminian Magazine*, a lengthy review of Nichols' first volume was published in 1825.<sup>8</sup> In 1828 a lengthy review, mostly consisting of excerpts of Arminius' writings, from Nichols' second volume was published by the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*.<sup>9</sup>

James Nichols did not complete his translation project of Arminius' writings. His son, William, would translate the third and final volume of Arminius' *Works* in 1875.<sup>10</sup> However, in between that time, William R. Bagnall, an ordained minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, would produce his own translation of the *Writings of James Arminius* in three volumes in 1853 (republished in 1956).<sup>11</sup> However, the first two volumes were based on Nichols' *Works*. That same year of the original release, the *Methodist Quarterly Review* noted Bagnall's publication.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arminius, James and James Nichols, *The Works of James Arminius Volume One*, (London, UK: James Nichols, 1825).

Arminius, James and James Nichols, *The Works of James Arminius Volume Two*, (London, UK: James Nichols, 1828).

<sup>7</sup> Bangs, Nathan, and John Emroy, *The Methodist Magazine, Designed as a Compend of Useful Knowledge, and of Religious and Missionary Intelligence, for the Year of our Lord 1828*, (New York, NY: N. Bangs and J. Emroy, 1828) XI: 460-466, 469.

<sup>8</sup> *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine for the Year 1825: Being a Continuation of the Arminian or Methodist Magazine; First Published by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Vol. IV. Of the Third Series. Volume XLVIII. From the Commencement*, (London, UK: J. Kershaw, 1825) IV: 748-757.

<sup>9</sup> *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine for the Year 1828: Being a Continuation of the Arminian or Methodist Magazine; First Published by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Vol. VII. Of the Third Series. Volume LI. From the Commencement*, (London, UK: J. Mason, 1828) VII: 754-762, 825-832.

<sup>10</sup> Arminius, James and William Nichols, *The Works of James Arminius Volume Three*, (London, UK: William Nichols, 1875).

<sup>11</sup> Arminius, James, and *et. al.*, *The Writings of James Arminius*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956) 3 vols.

<sup>12</sup> McClintock, John, *The Methodist Quarterly Review 1853 Volume XXXV. -Fourth Series Volume V.*, (New York, NY: Carlton & Phillips, 1853.) XXXV: 472-473.

The translation works of Nichols and Bagnall would remain the only English versions of Arminius' writings, and with the passage of time, become increasingly more difficult to find. However, in 1986, Carl Bangs, a theologian in the Church of the Nazarene, republished the *London Edition* or the three-volume translation by James and William Nichols accompanied by a new introduction. This republication of Arminius' *Works* by Carl Bangs, remains to this very day, the best English version of Arminius' works to date.<sup>13</sup>

In 2012, W. Stephen Gunter, a theologian in the United Methodist Church, published the first ever modern English translation of a work by Arminius entitled, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary*.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Nichols and Bagnall's works which relied on the Latin works of Arminius, Gunter based his translation on Arminius' native Dutch. Gunter's work also includes very helpful notes and commentary on Arminius' *Declaration of Sentiments*.

### **Works on Arminius**

Not only have Methodists translated Arminius works into English, but they have also written upon the life and works of the famed Dutch theologian. In 1843 Nathan Bangs, America's first great Methodist theologian, published a work entitled, *The Life of James Arminius*.<sup>15</sup> Bangs' work is a condensation of the first two volumes of Nichols' *Works of James Arminius* and is for a more general audience. In 1857, book publishing agents from the Methodist Episcopal Church South published John Guthrie's translation of Caspar Brandt's *The Life of James Arminius Professor of Theology in the University of Leyden, Holland*. Thomas O. Summers, a leading theologian in the Methodist Episcopal Church South, wrote a brief introduction praising the work.<sup>16</sup> In 1879, Daniel D. Whedon, an equally prominent theologian

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<sup>13</sup> Arminius, James and Carl Bangs, *The Works of James Arminius*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986) 3 vols. I personally own the 1991 reprint edition.

<sup>14</sup> Arminius, James, and W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Bangs, Nathan, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D., Formerly Professor of Divinity in the University of Leyden. Compiled from his Life and Writings, as Published by Mr. James Nichols*, (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1843).

<sup>16</sup> Brandt, Caspar, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D., Professor of Theology in the University of Leyden, Holland. Translated from the Latin of Caspar Brandt, Remonstrant Minister, Amsterdam, by John Guthrie, A.M. with an Introduction by Thomas O. Summers*, (Nashville, TN: E. Stevenson & F. A. Owen, 1857).

from the Methodist Episcopal Church, republished an article from *Johnson's Universal Cyclopedia* entitled, *Arminianism and Arminius* in the *Methodist Quarterly Review*.<sup>17</sup> The Canadian Methodist theologian, Edward Hartley Dewart, republished Whedon's article in Toronto that same year but in pamphlet form and with an introduction and a new title, *What is Arminianism? With a brief sketch of Arminius*.<sup>18</sup> Dewart likewise published an article of his own four years earlier in 1875 entitled, *The Life & Theology of Arminius*; this constituted the first article ever published in *The Canadian Methodist Magazine*.<sup>19</sup>

The Methodist theologian and president of Boston University, William Fairfield Warren, traveled to the Netherlands and visited the various places where Arminius had lived and made his career. He also visited with some of the members of Arminius' church, the Remonstrant Brotherhood. Warren wrote about his experiences and published it in a book, *In the Footsteps of Arminius A Delightful Pilgrimage*, in 1888.<sup>20</sup>

In 1894, Methodist theologian George Lewis Curtiss published a book based on his lectures at DePauw University entitled, *Arminianism in History or the Revolt from Predestinationism*.<sup>21</sup> Not only does Curtiss write upon Arminius and other Remonstrant theologians, but he examines Methodist writers as well. In 1895, Wilbur F. Tillet, a theologian in the Methodist Episcopal Church South, oversaw theology students from the Senior Class of '95 at Vanderbilt University put together a compilation of essays into book form entitled, *The Theologians of Methodism*.<sup>22</sup> In this book on Methodist theologians, it is not John Wesley who

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<sup>17</sup> Whedon, Daniel D., *Methodist Quarterly Review. 1879 Volume LXI.- Fourth Series, Volume XXXI.*, (New York, NY: Phillips & Hunt, 1879) XXXI: 405-426.

<sup>18</sup> Dewart, E. H., *What is Arminianism? With a Brief Sketch of Arminius by Rev. D. D. Whedon, D.D., LL.D. with an Introduction by Rev. E. H. Dewart, D.D.*, (Toronto, ON: William Briggs, 1879).

<sup>19</sup> Dewart, E. H., *The Canadian Methodist Magazine Devoted to Religion, Literature and Social Progress*, (Toronto, ON: Samuel Rose, 1875) I: 1-13.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, Willian F., *In the Footsteps of Arminius A Delightful Pilgrimage*, (New York, NY: Phillips & Hunt, 1888).

<sup>21</sup> Curtiss, Geo. L., *Arminianism in History; or, The Revolt from Predestinationism*, (Cincinnati, OH: Cranston & Curts, 1894).

<sup>22</sup> Tillet, Wilbur F. and et. al., *The Theologians of Methodism Theses by Members of the Senior Class in the Biblical Department of Vanderbilt University*, (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishing Co., Inc., 1992).

starts the book off in chapter one; instead, these Methodist writers began their book with James Arminius. Wesley is relegated to chapter four, after Arminius, Simon Episcopius and Hugo Grotius are treated in chapters one, two and three respectively.

Celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of James Arminius' birth, the Remonstrant Brotherhood held a symposium in the Netherlands to commemorate the legacy of their founder. Two years later, in 1962, Gerald O. McCulloh, a Methodist book editor from Abingdon Press, published some of the papers from that symposium in book form entitled, *Man's Faith and Freedom: The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius*.<sup>23</sup> In 1971 (but later updated in 1985), Carl Bangs published the definitive biography on Arminius to date, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*.<sup>24</sup> This work supersedes the biography of Guthrie and Brandt.

In 2014, Abingdon Press published a work entitled, *Reconsidering Arminius: Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide*.<sup>25</sup> This book has multiple authors, both Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan. The Wesleyan contributors to this positive book on Arminius are Thomas H. McCall and E. Jerome van Kuiken, both theologians in the Wesleyan Church, Mark H. Mann, a theologian in the Church of the Nazarene and W. Stephen Gunter.

In 2012, Thomas H. McCall, along with his colleague Keith D. Stanglin, published *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace*.<sup>26</sup> In this book they expound on the grace centered theology of James (or *Jacob* in modern 21<sup>st</sup> century American English) Arminius. In 2020, they released a follow up book, *After Arminius: A Historical Introduction to Arminian Theology*.<sup>27</sup> In that work, they examine not only Arminius' theology, but that of his followers, the Remonstrants, along with the theologies of Arminianism in the Church of England and in the Methodist tradition. In many respects, this book follows the historiographical tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodist writers

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<sup>23</sup> McCulloh, Gerald O., and *et. al.*, *Man's Faith and Freedom The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Bangs, Carl, *Arminius A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Stanglin, Keith D., and *et. al.*, *Reconsidering Arminius Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide*, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2104).

<sup>26</sup> Stanglin, Keith D., and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius Theologian of Grace*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> McCall, Thomas H., and Keith D. Stanglin, *After Arminius A Historical Introduction to Arminian Theology*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

by placing Methodism within the broader Arminian theological tradition. McCall and Stanglin's work has superseded and replaced the works of Tillet and Curtiss.

### **Promoting the theology of Arminius**

It should be noted that Methodist theologians have promoted Arminius in more ways than simply translating his works into English or publishing historical and biographical information on the Dutch theologian. His theological system has been championed, and even modified and improved upon, by Methodist theologians throughout the entire history of our tradition. Whether it be in books on systematic theology, commentaries on the Bible, sermons, or various theological tracts, treatises and essays, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodist theologians were on the forefront of promoting and defending an Evangelical Arminian theology.

### **The Fall of Arminianism in the Wesleyan Tradition**

Beginning in the late 1800's and early 1900's a new theology arose among the Methodists. Influenced by Higher Criticism and the new philosophies coming out of Germany, Methodists abandoned the theology of their fathers and forefathers. With the advent of a new hermeneutics, Post-Kantian philosophies and Darwinian Evolution, the Pre-Modern Arminian soteriological system increasingly looked antiquated and obsolete. For the new Theological Liberals and their Post-Liberal descendants, traditional Protestant theologies such as Arminianism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism, (and even traditional Roman Catholic theologies such as Thomism, Molinism and Congruism) were archaic soteriological systems predicated on outdated metaphysics, outdated epistemologies, outdated hermeneutics, an outdated view of Divine Revelation and Inspiration, and an outdated anthropology. Methodists abandoned their Wesleyan-Arminianism for German Liberalism, Boston Personalism, Process Theology, Neo-Orthodoxy, various Post-Modern Neo-Marxist theologies, Post-Liberal or Narrative Theology, Open Theism, and Theological Pluralism.

### **The Rebirth of Arminianism in the Wesleyan Tradition**

With the rise of Wesley Studies spearheaded by Albert Outler, a small number of scholars began to return to the theology of John Wesley (and by default, return to an Evangelical Arminianism). The works on John Wesley by Kenneth J. Collins and Thomas C. Oden are prime examples of this. In 2006, a Baptist scholar by the name of Roger E. Olson released a book filled



with long quotations from Arminius, Wesley and various Methodist theologians. This book entitled, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*,<sup>28</sup> sowed the seeds for a small but continually growing renaissance in scholarly interest concerning the life and thought of James Arminius, just as Albert Outler had sowed the seeds for a renaissance in Wesley scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, there has been a recent upsurge in scholarly interest in the life and thought of James Arminius both among Wesleyan and Baptist (and even Reformed!) scholars. With the recent formation of the Global Methodist Church, a more conservative alternative to the United Methodist Church, and thus more receptive of Evangelical Arminianism, the future of Evangelical Arminianism within the Methodist tradition is looking bright.

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<sup>28</sup> Olson, Roger E., *Arminian Theology Myth and Realities*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).