

## A Wesleyan Historian's Response to Postmodernism

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This paper began as a response to colleague Dr. Phillip Davis's lecture at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in March 2016 on "The Post-modern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative."<sup>\*</sup> Davis was a student of the Flemish Roman Catholic theologian Lieven Boeve, and received his Ph.D. at the University of Louvain. Davis's dissertation dealt with the French post-modernist philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. As Albert Outler encouraged the followers of John Wesley to do as Wesley did and "plunder the Egyptians" (from Exodus 12:36), that is, to "exploit the full range of secular literature, science, and philosophy—always with a view to the enrichment of one's Christian wisdom and the enhancement of his effectiveness in communicating the Christian message,"<sup>1</sup> Davis has "plundered" the post-modernists that we may be wiser and communicate more effectively the gospel to this present age. Davis's main argument is that a "theology that seeks understanding" can "benefit from engaging with Lyotard's post-modern critical philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Davis's paper has directed our attention to postmodernism in a very specific way by focusing on one prominent proponent of the movement, and on one theologian deeply engaged with postmodernism. I will respond from the standpoint of a historian teaching in the Asia-Pacific context and informed by the Wesleyan tradition.

"Simplifying to the extreme," said Lyotard, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>3</sup> Davis rightly warns against reducing our understanding and criticism of Lyotard to this simplification, but it

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<sup>\*</sup> *Editor's Note:* The referenced lecture is published above: Phillip E. Davis, "The Post-modern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative," *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44.

<sup>1</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship, 1975), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, "The Postmodern Condition," 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1997), 36.

provides an initial point of dialogue between history and postmodernism, and Davis himself focuses on the “Christian Open Narrative.” How is a historian of the Christian faith, accustomed to Wesleyan ways of interpreting the world to respond to postmodernism and, in particular, to this skepticism toward overarching interpretations of reality?

Historians have drawn away from grand theories of historical development. If Lyotard accentuates the “small narratives,”<sup>4</sup> historians too have focused on discrete monographs that disclaim broad implications. “Teleological narrative history,” historian Gordon S. Wood comments, “cannot be truly scientific; it is simply story-telling, not essentially different from fiction.”<sup>5</sup> Like postmodernists, historians generally doubt that objectivity is achievable. All empirical studies, including their own, are tainted with subjectivity and relativity. Yet historians, like other writers, continue to tell what they hope will be intelligible and persuasive stories.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Christians believe that in one way or another God is involved in the affairs of this world. God provides the ending as well as the beginning-point of history. There is a revealed, Biblical narrative of God’s choosing. Theologians discuss the acts of God but disagree as to how God works presently. A Wesleyan understanding of God’s work in history is more interactive than determinative and, as a result, it seems to me, Wesleyans have little difficulty discarding determinative views of history. As Christians, Wesleyans understand that the effects of sin are universal, and that sin induces pride as well as the tendency to make idols of self and society. As a result, Wesleyan historians find it not so difficult to understand as inevitable the unrecognized prejudices that rest in the mind of even the most skilled and dispassionate scholars. Understanding sin, Christians are realists. The Wesleyan caveat is optimism that through

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<sup>4</sup> See Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2003), 105–106.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 53.

<sup>6</sup> See George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan U. Press, 1997), 101–117. See also Ron Creaseman, “The Loss of Metanarrative: Resources for Formulating a Wesleyan Response,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35 (Spring 2000), 166–167.

grace besetting prejudices may be recognized and confessed so that one might possess a chastened and self-emptied approach to one's field of study.

### I. Historiography and the Search for Meaning

One can find competing historiographical ideas across time. What unites the writing of history is its attempt to coherently describe events of the past. Writing history necessitates narration, connecting events together in plausible patterns of meaning. As such, historical accounts (like other explanations of human behavior) stand or fall depending upon plausibility. History involves interpretation of events. Emerging interpretations challenge existing ones as historians attempt to persuade readers that their narration makes better sense of events. This happens repeatedly.<sup>7</sup>

"Pre-modern" history performed a clear function within society. History told stories of the past that transmitted values from generation to generation. Story-tellers did not worry about documentation or even the historicity of their stories. The stories functioned as "myths" in the sense that they conveyed an over-arching set of values. Various religious myths recount sacred time, which is not separated from any other sense of time. Within the *chronos*, in the Hebrew and Christian tradition, God speaks and acts. Yet, when stories of olden times are retold, it is with the clear intention of comparing and contrasting the present to the primitive past. The present is shown to have fallen away from the original ideals and ethos of the people. In the case of history in the Hebrew and Christian tradition, nonetheless, the hearer hears of past failures as well as past glories. One can see this in Psalm 78, in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, and in the Puritans' jeremiads. Time and again the ancestors fell away from the covenant. This was just as important for the Hebrews and Puritans to remember as God's faithfulness, patience, and long-suffering. The ancestors kept resisting God's grace and, hence, the predicament in which they found themselves. The moral lesson is, clear:

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<sup>7</sup> Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003), 147. Similarly see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970).

do *not* be like your fathers and mothers. You can do better than they. You can keep the covenant that they constantly broke. Trust in God as they did not. Thus, the Hebrew-Christian narrative does not serve to justify the present but, rather, to judge it.<sup>8</sup>

God both punishes and rewards. The assumption of pre-modern historians is that Providence or Fate controls history. The “causative factors” of events are reduced to the hand of God. Nineteenth century narratives were powerfully emotive. For instance, like his Puritan ancestors, historian George Bancroft wrote dramatic stories unencumbered with annotations that told grand tales of God’s working among a chosen people, of heroic conquests and the annihilation of lesser peoples, and, ironically, of the rise and progress of humanitarian benevolence along with colonial domination.<sup>9</sup>

Determinism remained in the modern era. Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1776, described the inevitability of great cultures imploding. Gibbon discussed history as a “register of human follies, crimes, and misfortunes.”<sup>10</sup> Both Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, writing in the twentieth century, followed Gibbon. Like him they described inevitable cycles of growth and decline among civilizations and offered morals and lessons from the failures of past civilizations.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, sounding somewhat like the medieval writer Joachim of

<sup>8</sup>See Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1976); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1988). Bozeman draws upon the work of Mircea Eliade.

<sup>9</sup> On Bancroft, see David Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press), 18–36. On the return of the narrative to history, and concerns regarding it, see Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of the Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present* 85 (November 1979), 3–24, and see Gordon Wood’s 1982 criticism on this basis of Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, reprinted in Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, 40–61.

<sup>10</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 53–63.

<sup>11</sup> Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 59–64.

Fiore and his dispensational divisions of history, August Comte (1798–1857) offered a metanarrative that viewed civilizations as in stages of development. The “theological stage” was followed by the “metaphysical” and then by the “positive” era. The latter was characterized by science and the ascertainment of natural and physical laws governing the universe including society. Collective human behavior could be understood based on objective and dispassionate inquiry. The viewpoint that all societies were at varied points on a historical continuum carried over into the discipline of anthropology under E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), who placed civilizations and current societies on a spectrum from primitive to modern.<sup>12</sup>

Karl Marx (1818–1883), in the early nineteenth century, provided an alternative metanarrative in which historical events and human motivations were reduced to the struggle over commodities—to class struggle. Through the lens of cultural materialism, with its presuppositions regarding the basic needs of human beings, Marxists interpret past events and forecast future struggles, and believe that through revolutions history was coming to a culmination that would produce an idyllic, classless society. Beyond class struggles, as a mode of interpretation materialism gave primary historical importance to economic factors. Like scholars influenced by other metanarratives, those influenced by materialism assumed that they knew more than the people themselves involved in the struggles of life as to why events happened, and as to why inequalities and injustices persisted in the world. Their etic approach attributed less importance to the worldviews of the people they were studying. Historians such as E. P. Thompson, who saw no positive good in the working class's attraction to Methodism, warned, nonetheless, that history must not be speculative. He called upon historians to examine the historical record closely to prove what he was sure to be the reality of class struggle. Economic historians today, nonetheless, are not likely to explain the past through theories of economic determinism, but, rather, trace how present economies have come to assume their present forms.<sup>13</sup> Other modern historians adduced

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<sup>12</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1983), 272–273; Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1996), 16–29.

<sup>13</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, 270–271, 293–297; Gilderhus, *History and Historians*,

causation from a variety of other overarching factors, from the environmental to the psychoanalytic.<sup>14</sup>

The criticism of history by postmodernists has centered on several aspects. Roland Barthes, for instance, said in 1970 that “historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signified it; it asserts at every moment: this happened, but the meaning conveyed is only that somebody makes that assertion.”<sup>15</sup> This presupposes the hesitancy of historians to recognize the limitations of their methodology and objectivity. As we will see, this has not been the case. Historians have been self-critical. The second criticism of historians is that they impose a theory of progress upon history, which, if true, would represent a form of “metanarrative.” A whole school of historians, indeed, lent themselves to a progressive understanding of history. More and more, however, historians have disdained imposing theories of progress upon empirical evidence. Unlike social scientists, historians have not, for the most part, constructed theoretical frameworks. They have criticized “theory” for substituting for explanation, and for blunting the edge of historical investigation. Evidence, say modern historians, must be allowed to speak for itself.<sup>16</sup>

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55–58; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 221. For the application of Marxism to social theory see, for example, Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979), and the same author’s *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1974). On the impact of social and cultural history on economic history see Kenneth Lipartito, “Review Essay: Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism,” *American Historical Review* 121 (February 2016), 101–139.

<sup>14</sup> Representative of these modes of interpretation are Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920); John T. McNeill, Mathew Spinka, and Harold R. Willoughby, ed., *Environmental Factors in Christian History* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1939); Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958); and James R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Barthes’s *Introduction to Structuralism* in Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 12, 44, 52–52, 60, 90. See Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1979), 88–93, 252–290.

### A. The Question of Objectivity

A “scientific” approach to history, which claimed to be less prone than premodern history to over-arching and determinist interpretations of the great events of the past, entered the profession with the influences of the German historical seminars and their methods in the later part of the nineteenth century. Verification of historical documents and assertions became a critical part of the historian’s task. The emphasis was on uncovering the original sources of the political, ecclesiastical and social institutions of Europe. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) was the progenitor. Ranke rejected Georg W. F. Hegel’s metaphysics of the “cunning of Reason” or Spirit directing human affairs. Neither was Ranke interested in passing moral judgment on the past, but rather sought to report “how it actually was.” Ranke sent students to dusty archives, from which, principally, they reconstructed political and institutional histories. They delved into diplomatic history, wars, and the lives and thoughts of statesmen and church leaders. Ranke expected that once history had been fairly and thoroughly recorded, men and women would see God’s providence working in history, but this was an expectation based solely on careful research and not presumptions of where and how God might have worked. American historian Henry Baxter Adams famously summed up this approach, stating that Ranke was “determined to hold strictly to the facts of history, to preach no sermon, to point no moral, to adorn no tale, but to tell the simple historic truth.”<sup>17</sup> Like the social sciences, modern history developed “prescriptive rules” to govern the objective and fair treatment of evidence and foreswore any explicit attempt to inculcate values.<sup>18</sup>

This “positivist” perspective dominated the historical profession, including church history, throughout the twentieth century. Methodist historian Albert C. Outler wrote, for instance, that history was “the recollection and representation of selected segments of the human past in an intelligible narration based on public data verified by scientific observa-

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Georg G. Iggers, “Introduction,” to Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (London: Routledge, 2011), xii, footnote 4.

<sup>18</sup> See Breisach, *Historiography*, 232–234.

tion.”<sup>19</sup> Such faith in empirical methods dwelt in John Wesley himself. Wesley was strongly influenced by John Locke and a common-sense empirical tradition that placed confidence in experience as means toward knowledge, and, in his case, as a means of establishing the truth of doctrines about which the Bible might be interpreted in different ways. In Wesley the practical out-workings or utility of a theological point of view helped to determine validity. This was unlike Martin Luther and John Calvin, who, like the medieval scholastics, cared about right doctrine and little for the moral implications of doctrine.<sup>20</sup> In any case, Wesley did not doubt the graciously-given ability of human beings to understand nature and reality as it really was.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, modern historians shared the conviction that one can “grasp a subject matter that is real rather than an artefact of his [or her] own construction.”<sup>22</sup> They believed that they could not only discover historical causes and their effects, but also postulate laws that would depict and predict human behavior across time and space. Karl Popper (1902–1994), in particular, argued for truths derived from history that would be “independent of the conditions of time, place, and personal opinion,” and thus helpful and needful as a guide for humankind into the future.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, said Henri-Irenee Marrou, history aims to provide explanations of the past that are based on “the discovery, comprehension, the analysis of a thousand ties which, in a possibly inextricable fashion, unite the many faces

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<sup>19</sup> Outler, “Theodosius’ Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian,” *Church History* 34 (1965), 253.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1980), 315–316; and see pages 304–309.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Dreyer, “Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley,” *American Historical Review* 88 (February 1983), 12–30; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2002), 383–388; Ron Creaseman, “The Loss of Metanarrative,” 172–173; Thomas J. Oord, “A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy and David Ray Griffin’s Postmodern Vision,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35 (Spring 2000), 231–237.

<sup>22</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, 332.

<sup>23</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, 333.

of human reality one to the other.”<sup>24</sup> Reality corresponded to its description by historians. Marrou believed there could be no jumping to “causes and effects,” but only contentment with a description of developments. Morton White, on the other hand, believed that historians, weighing the evidence, must take a particular stand or “point of view” regarding the cause of events, all the while knowing that the historian’s “adoption of that point of view cannot always be justified by what some might call scientific considerations.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, White acknowledged that the historian, having read the evidence, must seize upon a conclusion. Likewise, Page Smith asked that historians not just describe all possible causes for events and list them as factors. This, Smith said, diminished the “dramatic” quality of history. Historians must be bold enough to take a stand. Smith did not consider this to be any less from an understanding of the world’s events as they really had occurred.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, already, there were seeds of doubt. Long ago, in December 1931, Carl Becker (1873–1945) delivered an address to the American Historical Association entitled “Everyman His Own Historian.” Becker was then serving as president of the Association. He defined history not as a description of what occurred in the past but as the “memory of things said and done,” and described it as “an imaginative creation” meeting the practical and even emotional needs of the historian in his or her social context. Historians, said Becker, were “subject to the limitations of time and place.” History is “conditioned by the specious present.” To an audience of historians who had great faith in their craft’s methodology, Becker called history but “a convenient blend of truth and fancy” possessing the “illusion” that the present version of the past was valid and that others were not.<sup>27</sup> Historians have a stake in the story they tell, or else they would not tell it. Cool objectivity makes for boring reading, or, as Becker put it, “complete detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile;

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<sup>24</sup> Henri-Irene Marrou, *The Meaning of History* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 192.

<sup>25</sup> Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper-Row, 1965), 111.

<sup>26</sup> Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 159.

<sup>27</sup> *The American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221–236.

for the really detached mind is a dead mind.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), expressed doubts as to the ability of historians to understand any more than what their own thoughts could construct. This disillusion with modernity, with its faith in empirical methods as well as social progress based upon objective knowledge, shook the historical profession.<sup>29</sup>

For the next fifty years and more, as if to prove Becker and Collingwood wrong, historians with hopes of proving that objectivity was more than a noble dream produced passionless dissertations and monographs devoid of adjectives and strewn with footnotes to primary sources. But doubt that trained historians could tell an honest tale and speak without self-interest shadowed such optimism. Duly chastised historians accepted the limitations. They balanced between claiming too much and too little of historical investigation. In spite of epistemological questions, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob admonished historians to believe that “truths about the past are possible, even if they are not absolute, and hence are worth struggling for.” The practice of history, they continued, “encourages skepticism about dominant views, but at the same time trusts in the reality of the past and its know-ability.”<sup>30</sup>

That is, though few historians would doubt that their own subjectivi-

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<sup>28</sup> Becker, “Detachment and the Writing of History,” in *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl Becker*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1968), 24.

<sup>29</sup> See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1936; reprint, London: Oxford U. Press, 1956).

<sup>30</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 7, 11, and see pp. 142–146, 159. See also Michael Kammen, *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1987), 96–102; The question of objectivity in the historical profession is the central problem of Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American National Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1988). See especially Part IV, “Objectivity in Crisis,” 415–629. The June 1989 issue of *The American Historical Review* examined the influences of postmodernism upon the profession. David Harlan spoke of the “epistemological crisis” in the historical profession caused by “post-modern literary criticism.” Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” *The American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989), 581, 583. Similarly, the May 1992 issue of *Past and Present* was devoted to leading historians’ perceptions of postmodernism’s effect on history. See also David Noble, *Historians against History*, 140–146; Breisach, *Historiography*, 328, 332–333.

ties influence their writing, equally few would dismiss entirely the idea that there were actual objects of inquiry and that these were knowable in some way, to some degree. Postmodernist Hans Kellner comments that “Historians do not ‘find’ the truths of past events; they create events from a seamless flow, and invent meanings that produce patterns within that flow.”<sup>31</sup> This is true in some sense, but historians do not “create” the events they describe. Historians would recognize that the inquirer—the historian—is also in the web of existential struggle, but few historians would be “anti-foundational”: few would believe that perceptions of reality were totally constructed by the perceiving one. I agree with William Katerberg, that despite the debates over the theory and philosophy of history “the day-to-day teaching and scholarship of most historians has not changed in any essential way.”<sup>32</sup>

## B. Postmodern Historiography

Like postmoderns, historians possess a “hermeneutics of suspicion” regarding both the objectivity of authors and metanarratives. Postmoderns regard authors, including historians with ample documentary evidence, as self-aggrandizing. Even if a historian writes scathing criticisms of his own people, it is to prove himself superior to others. Pessimism regarding objectivity is a pessimism regarding human nature. In that sense post-war postmodernism connected with neo-orthodox criticisms of theological modernism, which made human beings morally virtuous. American historians such as Perry Miller and Joseph Haroutounian turned to the dour Puritans with the idea that their darkly Calvinist views of human nature provided the best critique of cultural modernism. The “post-modern,” Haroutounian wrote in 1932, returned to the “tragic sense of life.”<sup>33</sup> That

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> William Katerberg, “The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the Historian’s Vocation,” in *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation*, ed. John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 102. See Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 111. Also helpful here, Oord, “A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy,” 216–244.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Haroutounian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon, 1964), xxv.

is, the pessimistic view of postmoderns, denying that an individual could escape his or her own *hubris*, is rooted in pre-modern Christian tradition. Such views were shared by Reinhold Niebuhr, who stated soon after World War Two that “the dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history.”<sup>34</sup>

By this Niebuhr meant that modern culture had expressed its faith in the progress and triumph of the human enterprise in history. Niebuhr associated this misguided faith in progress with Christian perfectionism, especially the sort of perfectionism preached by Methodists. The nineteenth century’s optimism toward the perfectibility of men and women and society had crashed, Niebuhr believed. Men and women could not build the kingdom of God on earth. The meaning of history was, if anything, the *failure* of history. To God must not be ascribed responsibility for the events of history, Niebuhr said. Humanity’s only hope comes from beyond history. Niebuhr influenced the profession of history, but, more than that, he shared their growing pessimism that progress in any moral sense could be expected in history. This modern culture derided by neo-orthodox theologians such as Niebuhr came under the same indictment by postmodern critics.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of this awareness of human *hubris*, the rules changed in the writing of history from obscuring oneself as much as possible from the narrative to forthrightly acknowledging one’s subjectivity and one’s subjective encounter with the historical events. Contemporary historians influenced by postmodernism emphasize that narrative is based on the his-

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<sup>34</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 3.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to *Faith and History*, see Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937). See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Role in American Political Thought and Life,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 126–150; and various chapters in *Paths of American Thought*, eds. Arthur M. Schlesinger and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964). Also, see Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1960), 217–269. On Niebuhr’s response to contemporary Methodism, see Floyd T. Cunningham, “The Christian Faith Personally Given: Divergent Twentieth-Century American Methodist Thought” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983), 56, 198–199.

torians' own place and time, on his or her subjective perspectives. While each historian attempts to be objective, and to base narratives on reliable sources, there are inevitable biases. There is always a story behind the historian that determines what questions are asked, and whose stories to tell. That every historian stands at a particular place in time and space influences which events are told and how they are retold. Speaking in South Africa in 1994, respected historian Eric Foner recognized the truth that "white scholars cannot simply think of themselves as 'raceless' practitioners of empirical research untouched by the structures of power created and maintained [in this case] by apartheid."<sup>36</sup> Historians' perspectives on their craft of research and writing evidenced pessimism that historical events could be understood as they happened, and that, even if they could, their re-telling would be laden with the conscious and unconscious motives of the re-teller. Even the original record of events possesses subjective biases unknown even to their originators, and historians shape the re-telling of events based on their own biases and the particular contexts in which they write. From this vantage point, stating one's subjectivities directly and boldly is one way to approach historical integrity. Doubting the invincibility of footnotes, postmoderns turn back to pre-modern historiography in the sense of recognizing the literary rather than the scientific nature of the historians' craft.<sup>37</sup>

One should not attempt to tell the story of others, postmoderns emphasize. In the 1960s white historians were under criticism for writing about slavery and other segments of African-American history. In the Philippines, American historian Glenn Anthony May was criticized by Philippine historian Reynaldo Iletto for his understanding of Filipino hero

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<sup>36</sup> Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 107.

<sup>37</sup> See the "Preface," to James Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), and, Shirley A. Mullen, "Between 'Romance' and 'True History': Historical Narrative and Truth Telling in a Post-modern Age," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 23–40. See also M. Howard Rienstra, "History, Objectivity, and the Christian Scholar," in *History and Historical Understanding*, ed. C. T. McIntire and Ronald Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 69–82.

Andres Bonifacio. May looked for objective, archival sources in his study of Bonifacio, and doubted the oral sources of Philippine historians such as Teodoro Agoncillo. May, Ito believed, deprecated the Filipino as emotional and in need of “disciplining and tutelage.”<sup>38</sup> Under postmodern scrutiny my account of Philippine Protestantism, for instance, is bound to be filled with my own biases as an American missionary serving in the Philippines for more than thirty years. Perhaps I might write about other missionaries, but I should not presume to tell the story of Filipinos. My historical tendency would be to objectify them. It is impossible for me to enter into their world. I cannot tell their story, postmoderns would say, and I should not presume to try.<sup>39</sup> Only with persons like themselves can historians sense an affinity and inner identity that transcends objectivity. This sense of inner subjective correspondence was articulated by Wilhelm Dilthey in the early twentieth century. For Dilthey the ways that historians mentally apprehend their own life processes gives them an interpretive clue, framework, and affinity that comes together in a descriptive whole. One needs an inner subjective empathy and identification with the objects of historical discussion.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, John Wesley understood that there was an inner, spiritual sense, a direct communication of knowledge by God that transcended either Scripture or experience. Though Wesley did not transfer this idea to

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<sup>38</sup> Reynaldo C. Ito, *Filipinos and Their Revolution: Event, Discourse, and Historiography* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila U. Press, 1998), 228; 218–237. See Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan* (Quezon City: U. of the Philippines Press, 1956); Glenn Anthony May, *A Past Recovered* (Quezon City: New Day, 1987), 102–104.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Floyd T. Cunningham, “Diversities within Post-War Philippines Protestantism,” *The Mediator* 5 (October 2003): 42–144, to Melba Padilla Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* (Manila: Anvil, 2011). Or one might compare Raymond W. Beaver, *Partners in Mission: American Baptists and Philippine Baptists in Mission Together 1900–1985* (Iloilo: ABC, 1988), to Nestor Distor Bunda, *A Mission History of the Philippine Baptist Churches 1898–1998 from a Philippine Perspective* (Aachen: Verlag, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. H. P. Rickman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 95–112.

the writing of history, knowledge for him transcended experience.<sup>41</sup>

Wesley's concern for impoverished people corresponded to a post-modern agenda that pays close attention to the oppressed struggles of minorities against ruling elites. Likewise social history, as a sub-discipline within the historical profession, like postmoderns, gave preferential attention to the voiceless lives of those who had been unheard in the textbooks of history. Coming to prominence during the same tumultuous 1960s, when Lyotard began to formulate his ideas, social historians looked closely at the behavior and the thought of the multitudes that had been forgotten or treated condescendingly by previous historians. Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger's approach to social history, and his influence upon American historiography, said one of his students, could be compared to the influence of the French *Annales* School.<sup>42</sup> Like the *Annales* School, Schlesinger's students paid close attention to people and movements of people outside the corridors of social prestige and power. They included the urban poor, immigrants, Roman Catholics, Jews, women, Southern farmers, African-Americans and Latinos. Social historians described the daily lives and faith of forgotten people. Working from a variety of perspectives, they recovered the lived religion and the behavior and beliefs of the otherwise "anonymous." They understood that common participants' points of view were of intrinsic importance. Social history became the most attractive sub-discipline of history for up-and-coming historians. They were attracted to the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose emic approach granted integrity and coherency to religious world-views. For social historians as well as for post-moderns history is a "constant retrieval of the suppressed 'other',"<sup>43</sup> and the multispectral dimensions of history cannot be pieced together into any grand narrative.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas J. Oord, "A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy," 233–238.

<sup>42</sup> Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979), 7. Also see E. J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971), 21–25, and Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan U. Press, 1997), 51–64.

<sup>43</sup> Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 161.

<sup>44</sup> See Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, and the review of

One social historian, Nazarene Timothy L. Smith, a student of Arthur Schlesinger, based upon Christian principles his own noble dream of historical objectivity. In the Preface to *Revivalism and Social Reform* Smith wrote: “The purpose of historical study is to explore fully and summarize accurately what really happened in the past.” This reflected confidence in the historian’s abilities to know. Historical consciousness was inherent in the Hebrew-Christian tradition and basic honesty compelled historians to search for the broadest possible selection of materials upon which to base conclusions. Methodology had nothing to do with faith. Smith continued, “Scholars do not pretend to have achieved absolute objectivity, any more than the old-time Methodist preachers who professed sanctification meant to claim sinless perfection. Accuracy and impartiality are, however, the historian’s cherished goals.”<sup>45</sup> Faith led to greater, not lesser objectivity. Prayer made a better scholar. Impartiality required, Smith said, “a mind under the judgment of the eternal Father, and thus aware that one’s frailties and prejudices run far deeper than his power to perceive them; a spirit which is by the Holy Spirit filled with compassionate care for all men [and women], and hence ready to search first of all for what seemed true to them about their times and experiences and then to judge them with the same generosity one who knows something of his frailty would wish to be judged; an experience of being forgiven and of trusting in God’s grace which makes all conclusions about other men [and women] tentative, restrained, open to correction; and, finally, a devotion to truth, de-fined as both accuracy and honesty, so great as to cause the historian to rest these tentative judgments on the widest and most objective possible reading of the available evidence.” Thought and prayer are, Smith continued in an address to the quadrennial meeting of the Phi Delta Lambda, national honor society of the colleges of the Church of the Nazarene, at Miami Beach, Florida, June 17, 1972, “not enemies but allies.” Faith also, for Smith, led to a greater empathy for and search in the pages of history for those who were on the ignored periphery of society. The Wesleyan in

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this book by Gordon S. Wood, in *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 133–145; Brisach, *On the Future of History*, 65–66.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1957), 10.

Smith conjoined with the practice of social history to prefer more descriptive emphasis upon the lives of the many rather than on an elite strand of theological or ecclesiastical leadership. Unlike some other social historians, Smith remained close to common people—preaching in Nazarene congregations and lecturing in various denominational colleges. He did not condescend obligingly to the common people of the past while disdaining the common people of the present.<sup>46</sup>

The horrors of slavery and its lingering aftermath in segregation, racial prejudice and injustice was the watershed issue for twentieth-century American historians and corresponds to the Holocaust in European history and postmodern thought. Social historians, including Smith, paid attention to the issues of race that tore apart American society. One approach arising in the 1960s among American historians reduced the institution of slavery to that which could be rationalized by economic quantification. Many historians as well as African Americans were rightly outraged and turned their attention to the voiceless angst of slaves. They found ways to hear the unheard groans. All forms of historical evidence, from sermons of African American preachers, to songs slaves sang, to reminiscences of former slaves, to the archaeology of slave quarters, and records of slave ships, came into play in rehearsing the evil of slavery. But nothing was more poignant than the 1970s television series “Roots,” and subsequent movies such as the more recent “Twelve Years a Slave” and “The Birth of a Nation.” Visual media emotes historical evil for post-moderns in a way print cannot. Media is rightly criticized when it strays too far from the historical record. The standard of pure objectivity is not maintained as even a noble idea when it comes to the dramatization of

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<sup>46</sup> Smith, *The Knowledge of the Lord*, pamphlet (1972), 10–11. See, for example, Smith, “Lay Initiative in the Religious Life of American Immigrants, 1880–1950,” in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, edited by Tamara Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), and Floyd T. Cunningham, “Common Ground: The Perspective of Timothy L. Smith on American Religious History,” *Fides et Historia* 44 (Summer–Fall 2012), 38–43. On social historians tending to prefer the common people of the past to those of the present, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 592, citing G. Strauss, “The Dilemma of Popular History,” *Past and Present* 132 (August 1991), 133.

such events as slavery. This is to say that yes, as Lyotard maintains, where language is inadequate media may be made to be a tool for justice precisely because of its power to transcend rationality.<sup>47</sup>

Wesleyanism not only has used emotive language to convey truth, but, at its best, has championed the poor and oppressed. Among Wesleyans accustomed to talking about the universality of grace something reverberates with an anti-elitist, egalitarian preference in history. Wesleyans, as a result, have been like postmodernists celebrative of diversity. We possess, as Scott Daniels says, a “broad tent.”<sup>48</sup> One way of a Christian historian reporting the gospel is to be a voice for the thousands of common people who were transformed by the message. We can tell their stories, and, in so doing, amplify muted voices.

With the growing importance of Christianity in South America, Africa, and Asia, church historians have moved beyond a Euro-centric interpretation and, more than they had before, told the story of the church beyond the West on its own terms. At the same time, there has been more focus on women in the church’s history and religious movements among ethnic groups. Influenced by the *Annales* and similar approaches to social history, and learning from anthropologists such as Geertz and Anthony F. C. Wallace, church historians have described the beliefs and devotion of common people across the centuries. They have become interested not only in the thoughts or acts of a few, but in what lay persons were thinking and in how they were behaving.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Compare, for instance, the quantitative approach of Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1974) to Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972). Among the many accounts in the 1970s giving voice to the voiceless see Timothy L. Smith, “Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Church History* 31 (December 1972), 497–512, and Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> “A Big Tent: The Generous Orthodoxy of Wesleyanism,” in *Post-modern and Wesleyan: Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities*, eds. Jay R. Akkerman, Thomas Jay Oord, and Brent D. Peterson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 23–26.

<sup>49</sup> See Wilbert Shrenk, “Toward a Global Church History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (April 1996), 50–54; Paul Spickard, “It’s the World’s History:

In describing this I suggest that contemporary historians avoid the idea that there is one “Christian” “grand narrative” that becomes “hegemonic,” as the postmoderns suggest. Unlike “pre-modern” Christian historians, who described the work of providence in historical accounts, and unlike those whom I would consider “pre-modern” Christian preachers who link the Bible’s apocalyptic literature with current events, Christian historians working under “modern” prescriptions of objective inquiry would never, as historians, presume to describe the mighty works of God in post-canonical history. Furthermore, historians ascribe to what might be considered a postmodern perspective by their own distrust and skepticism toward themselves as well as any overarching schemes of history, and by their concentration upon discrete segments of history.

Historians recognize that every person orients his or her life according to some particular view of the world, and that includes themselves. This worldview is constructed by the social networks of which they are a part. Each segment of experience is interpreted, understood, and responded to according to a worldview. This is a kind of “self-legitimation”<sup>50</sup> described by sociologists. Now and then, there is a significant “paradigm” shift that changes the ways in which people construct their view of the world. Thomas Kuhn’s history of such paradigm shifts in science pointed to the relativity of hypotheses generated by empirical science. What may be accepted today by scientists as perfectly fitting evidence, may tomorrow be overturned by a new discovery or simply by someone’s persuasively proven alternative to the given account. This is another way of saying is that there is no finality in any given interpretation, but rather, as Friedrich Nietzsche said more than a century ago, a “continuous chain of ever-new interpretations.”<sup>51</sup> Though Lyotard has called narrative, in comparison to science,

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Decolonizing Historiography and the History of Christianity, *Fides et Historia* 31 (Summer–Fall 1999), 13–29. See particularly Date T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), and vol. 2: *Modern Christianity from 1454–1800* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Davis, “The Postmodern Condition,” 8.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche cited in Southgate, *Postmodernism in History*, 145. See Thomas Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological*

another form of knowledge (or, more specifically, another genre of discourse), Kuhn suggests that scientific theories are but another form of narrative giving structure to our understanding of and ability to cope with the world.<sup>52</sup>

I believe that theologians in the Wesleyan tradition have understood this relativity of the theological task even while standing on the shoulders of successive generations of theologians. H. Orton Wiley's three-volume *Christian Theology* might have taken less than twenty years to write were he not "constantly discovering new truth," each demanding, he said, "a place in the plan of the work." Similarly late General Superintendent William Greathouse described theology as an "ongoing process" that endeavored to "interpret truth in language and thought forms relevant to each succeeding generation." Christian holiness is so grand, Greathouse continued, that "it defies any finality of expression."<sup>53</sup> The work of Greathouse's colleague, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, provided a seismic paradigm shift among theologians of holiness. Even J. Kenneth Grider, a traditionalist and staunch critic of Wynkoop, recognized the "genius" that was at work in her *A Theology of Love*.<sup>54</sup>

Davis's criticism of the idea that there is a Christian "meta" narrative, and his idea of an "open narrative" of Christian love resonates well with Wynkoop's *A Theology of Love*. "Love" is persuasive, non-coercive, non-manipulative. This describes the ways in which Wesleyans understand that God works in the world. The spirit and forms of love are integral to

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*Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), ch. 1, "Religion and World Construction.

<sup>52</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, chapter 2, "The Problem: Legitimation." On Kuhn, see also Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (Reprint, New York: Vintage, 1981), 106–111.

<sup>53</sup> H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1940), 3; William Greathouse, "Foreword" to *Holiness Teaching—New Testament Times to Wesley*, ed. Paul Bassett (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1997), 11. As is true of many Wesleyan scholars, Wiley wrote while busy as a school administrator. He also was caring for an invalid daughter.

<sup>54</sup> Grider's comments came in *The Seminary Tower* (Summer 1973), 9–10. See Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972).

the work of the Holy Spirit as Wesleyans understand it. Conceptually, an “open narrative,” one without a preconceived or predetermined end seems, as Davis says, congenial to Wesleyan ways of thought. As a historian, though, if I am asked to discern where God's wooing love has been at work in the world, I am taken at a loss. It is transcendent; it is beyond historical study.

Perhaps a historian could describe, as Ernst Troeltsch did, the “social teaching of the Christian churches.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps a historian could attempt a history of benevolence or compassion undertaken by the Christian church over the last twenty centuries. Yes, we might discern in the Biblical narrative love as being the center of the story. That would be very Wesleyan. It is the story of redemption and it is the story of Christ. Love is the “end” as well. Conceivably a historian could discern a trajectory from and toward love working within the church during the “interim” period between Christ and his coming Kingdom. Albert Schweitzer described as “interim” ethics the radical teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount because, he said, Jesus mistakenly thought the Kingdom imminent. Conversely, Wesleyans see Jesus' Sermon as the Kingdom or teleological ethic in itself.<sup>56</sup> For Wesleyans, the church must not be content with the lesser ethic, and strive toward the implementation of Kingdom ethic here and now. Perhaps one could describe the social reform efforts of the church in these ways, when it has worked to abolish slavery, to grant rights to women, and to protect children. Those efforts correspond to progressive historians attuned to the optimism of modernism as well as to postmillennialism and Methodists' social perfectionism. The Kingdom ethic of love is there in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in Galatians 3:28, which is the means by which we judge Paul's own “interim” ethics—telling slaves to be obedient to their masters, and wives to be silent in church. An “interim” ethic may allow class-segregated and ethnically homogeneous congregations, but the Church is content with these only if there are measurable increments toward the Kingdom. Paul describes a Kingdom in which there is “neither Jew

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<sup>55</sup> Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., translated by Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931).

<sup>56</sup> On Schweitzer see Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2: 1870–1914 (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1985), 163.

nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” A historian could describe the movements of the church and a church-influenced society toward Kingdom values, as the historian perceived those values.<sup>57</sup>

But I am afraid that an equal story would have to be written of the regressions and retreats away from the ethics of the Kingdom as well as advances toward it. Such histories would, for the sake of honesty, have to be put alongside histories of the church’s complicity in maintaining arguments for slavery, racism, war, and discrimination against women. Even benevolence may be for purposes of social control and the protection of ruling classes. As Ernst Breisach concludes, history is strewn with “glorious human achievements and the ash heaps of overreaching ambitions, the morally best and the abysmally evil.”<sup>58</sup>

Wesleyans might find affinity with liberation theology, which alerts us to the “abysmally evil” conditions of poverty, and their causes, as a narrative or paradigm for understanding historical movements. Ecumenical-minded theologians have looked for political liberation movements as places where God is at work apart from the Church. For a historian the concrete language of liberation is a bit easier to deal with than the slippery language of love, but whenever a paradigm speaks of God’s action rather than humanity’s, a historian as a historian must depart.<sup>59</sup>

History usually has been written and often taught from the standpoint of men and mostly as story of men. Feminist historians as well as theologians and postmoderns draw attention to language and strongly advocate not only a gender-inclusive language—to the extent of avoiding masculine pronouns as applied to God—but seeing history from the standpoint of

<sup>57</sup> George Hunter, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 176.

<sup>58</sup> Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 208.

<sup>59</sup> Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1491–1979)*, trans. and revised by Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), is written along the lines of liberation as a paradigm for understanding the church in Latin America. See especially pp. 3–20. See also Theodore Runyon, “Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation,” in *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 9–48, and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 432–447.

woman. What are the underlying, unstated assumptions and prejudices of middle-class Western white men who have largely composed the interpretative narratives of history? Christian historians, not just postmodern feminists, should be asking this question because self-serving sin is in the heart of everyone. Postmodern historiography enables Christians to acknowledge this blind-spot. It makes them aware of others—not only women but others marginalized out of arrogance and pride to the sidelines of historical narratives. The goal is to tell the story in an inclusive way that will incorporate insofar as possible the voices of all persons.<sup>60</sup>

## II. Postmodernism from the Standpoint of Wesleyan Historiography

The Wesleyan and Methodist revivals accompanied and contributed to the rise of modern society. The Methodist movement accompanied the shift from premodern to modern society. Bernard Semmel, like the French historian Elie Halevy before him, argued that Methodism enabled the English proletariat to transition from the traditional to the modern. Methodism was partly responsible for the “happy transition of British men and women to the modern world.”<sup>61</sup> The nineteenth century, which has been called the “Methodist Age” in American history, was a century of prolonged revival in which scientific inquiry accompanied the eventual securing of both prohibition and the abolition of slavery and women’s rights to vote. Like other men and women of the modern age, Wesleyans possessed confidence that human beings possessed the capability to discover, understand, and change the world.<sup>62</sup>

Wesleyans appealed to the grace that gifted them with disinterest-

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<sup>60</sup> Diane Elam, “Romancing the Postmodern: Feminism and Deconstruction,” in *the Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Jenkins, 66–74. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Men, Women, and God: Some Historiographical Issues,” in *History and the Christian Historian*, 91–105; Susan Juster, “The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism,” in *New Directions in American Religious History*, eds. Harry Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1997), 334–361; Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 184–189.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1973), 9–19; 192.

<sup>62</sup> C. C. Goen, “The ‘Methodist Age’ in American Church History,” *Religion in Life* 34 (Autumn 1965), 562–572; Winthrop Hudson, “The Methodist Age in American History,” *Methodist History* 12 (April 1974), 3–15.

edness and freed them from prejudices of gender and race and from class orientations injurious to objective inquiry. To put it in holiness language, Wesleyans believe that by grace they may be emptied of self-centeredness as well as any self-interest that might skewer their ability to weigh facts and judge fairly. They possess congeniality to liberal arts, which, in turn, provides an open-mindedness and tolerance regarding the views of others. At the same time, Methodists and other Wesleyans have sent thousands of missionaries around the world. Theirs is not an open-mindedness that believes all ideas equally true, but an open-mindedness that allows all ideas to be fairly understood.

Like modernism, the revivals of Methodists would seem to have promoted individualism. Revivalism sometimes degenerated into mechanistic and programmatic efforts to reach the “lost.” At the same time, the connection between individualism and revivalism do not go unquestioned. Revivals, by their very nature, came upon groups and forged community. If Whitefield’s revivals tended to leave individuals adrift, Wesley’s purposefully did not. He set converts in a Society, where they participated in class meetings, and some in bands of like-minded souls seeing sanctification. American revivalism powerfully connected and organized people.<sup>63</sup> Indeed its hymns and preaching often centered upon self, and holiness churches’ emphases too often have been upon the entire sanctification of individuals alone without balancing that with an equal call to responsible participation within community. Both the Asia-Pacific context and the Bible call upon us to seek ways by which our call to holiness may be received and embodied collectively. Our personal holiness cannot be conceived apart from what and who we are as one part of a body of believers seeking to find out what it means, in this time and in this place, to be a holiness people. This represents a repositioning of holiness that places the emphasis upon community, not the individual.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1999), 213–241.

<sup>64</sup> See *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, eds. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1: Paul’s View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001);

Historians speak only of the human response to God, not directly about God's doing. Historians are not privy in the same way as the inspired prophets and apostles to knowledge of God's specific acts. The canon is closed. We are not inspired to say with the same certainty as the Biblical writers "this is how God acted" when it comes to, for instance, the Councils, or the Reformation, or even Pilot Point, Texas, where the Church of the Nazarene was born. Historians allow others to tell their stories, but, of course, still choose which stories to tell. It is in choosing which stories to tell that historians' own points of view and agendas come to the fore, more than they might be willing to admit. This need not be an indictment. Should not the telling of the historical story be transformational? Is that not, really, the historian's goal? For instance, there was a flurry of interest among historians in the 1960s in abolitionism because of the correspondence between the turbulent times in which the historian lived and the decades preceding the Civil War. Similarly, the Vietnam War brought historians' attention to the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars and to studies of the roots of American imperialism. History about events toward which no one sees relevance yields nothing.<sup>65</sup>

As a matter of faith, Wesleyan historians believe that God's persuading, prevenient grace is at work among all people at all places in time—among the slaveholders and slaves as well as the abolitionists, among the anti-imperialists and the annexationists as well as Filipino "insurgents." This understanding of history is congenial to the Wesleyans' understanding that God works dynamically, by the gentle promptings of grace, and with human response—rather than by manipulation. The Wesleyan theological framework puts emphasis on the human response to God. There is a dynamic interrelationship between the grace given human beings and their freedom to respond. The voluntary cooperation of human beings to God's intentions is the way in which God interacts with the world.

As Wesleyans, we have understood well that knowledge is not an end in itself. Like Monastics, Wesleyans have been "less concerned with the

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Floyd T. Cunningham, "Holiness Embodied in the Asia-Pacific Context," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 4 (January 2005).

<sup>65</sup> See Katerberg, "The 'Objectivity' Question," 112–115.

acquisition of an explicit knowledge of God's salvific plan than with the consent to this plan," as Jean Leclercq wrote of Saint Bernard.<sup>66</sup> A right heart leads to God. "Being" precedes "doing" and when it comes to truly "knowing" God, being is more important than "knowing." Indeed, Wesleyans would understand with postmoderns that "becoming" is the essence of being. Perfection is in the uncompleted pilgrimage to fulfill one's potential, and is not absolute. One might have wrong doctrines, and still be found as a pilgrim in God. Formation and intimacy in community resonates among Wesleyans.<sup>67</sup> We possess a philosophy of history that sees God as the great Persuader. Wesleyan historians will note the many human variables and contingent factors that go into the making of history, and not ascribe all that has been or is solely to God. God has not pre-determined what will happen in each historical moment.<sup>68</sup>

The postmodern emphasis on the usability or "performability" of knowledge fits well. Wesleyan theologians have been a bit less prone than others, I believe, in dissecting theological obscurities. Wesley balanced Scripture, experience, reason and tradition and tested doctrines and Biblical interpretation by the behavior that the doctrines produced. We have been less concerned than other traditions in apologetics. This emphasis on practical knowledge is very close to pragmatism and may be one reason that Methodism performed well in America. It implies that all that is in the curriculum of theological education, for instance, must prove its practical value in ministry. This corresponds with the postmodern emphasis on the "functionalization of knowledge."<sup>69</sup> Theology must not only be preach-able, it must be livable.

The relative lack of concern for apologetics among Wesleyans and our preference for the applicability of knowledge means that our preachers may preach from the early chapters of Genesis, for instance, and find its

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<sup>66</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 1982), 220.

<sup>67</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), 11–12 (preface to the 2000 edition).

<sup>68</sup> See Floyd T. Cunningham, "Telling the Story of the Church of the Nazarene: A Wesleyan Reflection on Church History," *The Mediator* 4 (2002), 1–14.

<sup>69</sup> Davis, "The Postmodern Condition," 9.

stories meaningful and “true” because they resonate with human experience. Thus, as Davis mentions in his section on “narrative knowledge,” there is a “different set of rules” governing the “truth” that we derive from such stories and the “truth” that we derive from science. The truth derived from Biblical narratives resonates with us on a more deeply existential level than other narratives. Christian identity is formed by Biblical narratives. They became part of the interpretive framework and enable communication across cultures. The narratives invite the individual into a community that participates in the on-going work of God.

There are various ways in which historians, including historians in the Wesleyan tradition, can accept a postmodern approach. Wesleyans’ doctrines of grace lead them to be open toward the world, and that includes both philosophy and science. Their schools allow students to find meaning in scores of disciplines. Their theology of love drives them toward rather than away from the sinful world. It compels them to be open and optimistic toward an unfolding universe that is being guided persuasively with love by God.

