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**RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY**


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## *Making Sense Of Methodism*

"Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley" by Frederick Dreyer, in *The American Historical Review* (Feb. 1983), 400 A St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

Many researchers dismiss the religious thinking of John Wesley (1703–91), the founder of the Methodist Church, as incoherent and emotional. That assumption flavors scholarly perceptions of Methodism today, says Dreyer, a University of Western Ontario historian. But in fact, he argues, Wesley's theology was surprisingly consistent.

"I design plain truth for plain people," Wesley once declared. "I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations." The son of an Anglican clergyman, he experienced an "evangelical conversion" in 1738 that convinced him of the importance of *feeling* the love of God. Hence, Methodism did not demand assent to any particular article of faith. Unlike his contemporaries, Wesley was preoccupied not with "what but how the Christian ought to believe," Dreyer observes.

Individual conversions to Methodism were often accompanied by fits and convulsions—interpreted by the faithful as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence—which further detracted from Wesley's image as a theologian. But Wesley himself was skeptical of the value of such episodes: "I neither forward nor hinder them," he said.

In fact, says Dreyer, Wesley gave considerable thought to the nature of faith and human reason. His arguments closely paralleled those of

*John Wesley's 1738  
religious experience  
started him on the  
road to Methodism  
after 13 years as an  
Anglican minister.*



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John Locke, David Hume, and the other great 18th-century empiricist philosophers.

The empiricists rejected metaphysics and insisted that all knowledge must come from reflection on the evidence of the senses. Wesley agreed, calling Locke "a great master both of reasoning and language." In *Primitive Physic* (1747), "the work of an extreme empiricist," according to Dreyer, Wesley excoriated the physicians of his day for emphasizing theory over evidence in medical research. His insistence on the "direct witness" of God was a logical result of the empiricist emphasis on sensory evidence.

Like the empiricists, Wesley held that some things were beyond human ken. The Bible revealed "facts," such as the existence of the Trinity, which had to be acknowledged. *Understanding* the Trinity was quite another thing: "I have no concern with it," Wesley said.

Wesley relied more heavily on Scripture in making his arguments than did his counterparts. He "cared more about religion than he did about philosophy," Dreyer says. "But it is philosophy in the end that explains what his religion meant."

### *A Kind Word For Death*

"The Case for Mortality" by Leon R. Kass, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1973), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Arresting the aging process and prolonging human life are top priorities of medical researchers. At first glance, such efforts seem an unqualified good, but Kass, a University of Chicago biologist, is troubled by some of their implications.

The aging process, he says, prepares us for death. "Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them," wrote philosopher Michel de Montaigne in 1572, "I come to view death with much less frightened eyes." Death will become harder to accept as people live longer, healthier lives.

Nor would a longer life span significantly increase life's pleasures. "Would the Don Juans of our world," Kass asks, "feel better for having seduced 1,250 women rather than 1,000?" Indeed, he continues, "Is not the limit on our time the ground of our taking life seriously and living it passionately?" The immortals of Greek mythology, facing no such limits, were notoriously frivolous and shallow. Finally, knowledge of decay and death also heightens our appreciation of beauty.

The battle against aging, Kass argues, is at bottom a quest for immortality. It springs from a deep sense of human deficiency, a longing for "wholeness, wisdom, goodness"—rewards universally reserved for the afterlife in the world's religions. "No amount of more-of-the-same," he observes, will truly satisfy such desires.

Perpetuating oneself through one's children, though often "a snare and a delusion," is a secular tonic for such longings, Kass believes. But a society obsessed with the "narcissistic" fear of aging, he contends, "is