

John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness by D. Stephen Long
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Many books have been written about John Wesley, a few about Wesley's ethics, and only one about Wesley's moral theology. Herein lies the distinctiveness and peculiarity of Long's argument, situated at "the end of modernity" and "the end of ethics," that Wesley's views were more Thomistic than Lockean, more medieval than modern, and that that is the reason Wesley's thought still matters at all for Methodist moral theology. This is a well-researched argument about the turn to Lockean epistemology in the grand narrative of modern theology and ethics that claims Wesley as a moral theologian rather than a Christian ethicist.

Long places Wesley at the cusp of modernity, which he narrates in MacIntyrean fashion as a fall from moral theology to ethics, from emphasis on the good to a preoccupation with the right. Moderns erroneously assumed that "morality could be grounded in something immanent in humanity" (13) rather than in "the goodness of God." Precisely, he sees the emergence of (modern) ethics as a "transition ... from the will understood as rational appetite to the will understood as basically indifferent grounded on an arbitrary liberty" (66). Wesley's anthropology, based on a "liberty of indifference," and understanding of God and goodness are found to be incompatible, and Long jettisons Wesley's anthropology as a mistake (xvii, 48, 61-2). Instead, Long understands "divine illumination" and the "metaphysics of participation" as the medieval linchpins to Wesley's moral theology.

Ultimately, Long's book is not about Wesley or his ethics but about an abstraction, a tradition of thought called "John Wesley's moral theology." Long is less invested in Wesley than in the normative depiction of this tradition of thought. He emphatically disagrees with the emphasis in Wesleyan studies on being relevant "for today" (Williams 1960, Outler 1964, Runyon 1998, et al.) and interpreting Wesley as a Lockean empiricist, having made the modern turn "from metaphysics to epistemology" (6). He also rejects the more common option of ignoring Wesley altogether as being irrelevant or obsolete for modern ethics (15). Long's narrative about where "we" are "today," at the end of modernity, provides an internal logic to such assertions as: "It is precisely because Wesley's moral theology cannot be relevant for today that it has an ongoing significance" (xvi-xvii).

Long's book has many virtues—it is well researched and thoughtfully presented—but does being good necessarily mean being right? For example, his critique of Wesley's anthropology brings us uncomfortably close to notions of predestination that Wesley adamantly opposed. Although its narrative of the history of Western intellectual moral thought lacks nuance, the heart of this book is nonetheless a valuable contribution to the study of the founder of Methodism and his theological worldview. In the end, the reader might decide that Long (to paraphrase his assessment of Wesley) is just "not a good modern theologian," which would be just fine, according to him.