

**“The Lamb Slain from the Foundation of the World”:  
An Essay on Grounds for Belief in Divine Self-Limitation  
in Wesleyan and Methodist Theological Sources**

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## **Introduction**

I begin with a meditation on Revelation 13:8:

καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, οὓς οὐ  
γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου τοῦ  
ἐσφαγμένου ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου.<sup>1</sup>

According to the “Authorised” or “King James” version of the scriptures:

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [“the beast”], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of this verse renders the latter phrase as “everyone whose name is not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.”<sup>2</sup> This translation in itself poses a considerable mystery, because the expression “from the foundation of the world” (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου) follows immediately after “slain” or “slaughtered” (ἐσφαγμένου) in all manuscripts of the Greek text (thus ἐσφαγμένου ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου), and it is separated from the word “written” by twelve other words. There is a strong parallel between this verse and Revelation 17:8, which speaks of those “whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world” (NRSV), and that could justify the NRSV translation of 13:8.

But perhaps the underlying reason for the NRSV mistranslation is given in a contemporary commentary on the Revelation by Notre Dame scholar David E. Aune, who

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<sup>1</sup> Greek text as given in the Nestle-Aland edition; cited from Kurt and Barbara Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994, corrected edition of 1997), p. 657 of the Greek text.

<sup>2</sup> New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

prefers the translation “names written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered...” because, as he puts it, “it is logically and theologically impossible to make sense of the statement that the Lamb was slaughtered *before* the foundation of the world.”<sup>3</sup> And this is my question: could Christ theologically and perhaps even logically be “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”? To be more specific, could the community responsible for this verse of the Revelation have understood that the self-giving of God revealed in the Christian gospel was somehow a part of God's primordial self-giving and self-emptying character and in this sense present “before the foundation of the world”? Does the atonement reveal something about the eternal nature of God?

Does the gospel message suggest or allow that the suffering and self-limitation that God took upon God's own self in the events of Jesus' life and death and resurrection somehow characterize the eternal nature of God? The third ecumenical council (Ephesus, AD 431) pronounced a solemn anathema against anyone who would deny that the Word of God “suffered in the flesh,”<sup>4</sup> but this claim was made about “the Word of God,” and thus was made about God only insofar as God participated in the human suffering of Jesus Christ. My question is whether the suffering of Christ might indicate something not only about the humanity of Jesus Christ but also about the character of the divine in relation to the creation.

I propose to investigate this question with respect to sources from the Wesleyan theological tradition. There was a tendency on the part of progressive Methodist theologians in the twentieth century to suggest a notion of God as self-limited, especially in the work of Edgar Sheffield Brightman. The idea has received more widespread currency in recent decades from proponents of Liberation theology and other theologians (such as Jürgen Moltmann) concerned with issues of theodicy in the wake of widespread human suffering. Brightman offered his

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<sup>3</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1998), 747.

<sup>4</sup> In approving the anathemas of Cyril of Alexandria against Nestorius, the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) approved an anathema against anyone “who does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, and was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh”: anathema no. 12; in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, p. 96.

thoughts on divine self-limitation not as reflecting trends within Wesleyan thought but rather as modern innovations that were understood as challenging traditional or “classical” understandings of God. My concern with these issues of the passibility and self-limitation of God is not with the justification of these ideas based on philosophical grounds but with the coherence of these ideas with historic Christian doctrine and theology, and specifically, coherence with ideas about God expressed in the earlier development of the Wesleyan theological tradition.

Although belief in divine self-limitation was not asserted by Methodist theologians until the twentieth century, I believe that there were *grounds* for these notions in earlier Wesleyan sources, that is, earlier ideas and emphases from which these notions could grow. In what follows I will indicate three principal theological grounds for belief in divine self-limitation in Wesleyan theological sources: the passionate defense of divine goodness, the disavowal of the notion of divine impassibility and a corresponding assert of divine “passion,” and the assertion of creaturely freedom with respect to God. Some of these claims have been explored earlier, for example, in the volume of essays entitled *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (2001).<sup>5</sup> I hope I can contribute to a discussion of Wesleyan theologies and atonement theory by exploring these emphases within the Wesleyan theological tradition as they relate to the question of divine self-limitation.

### **The Wesleyan Defense of Divine Goodness**

A consistent trait of the Wesleyan theological tradition has been its consistent and passionate insistence on the goodness of God, claiming that the omnipotence of God cannot be asserted in any way that contradicts the essential goodness of God. Although the defense of divine goodness in itself might not imply any conflict with divine power, expressions of the problem of theodicy often involve the conjunction of the three claims that a) God wills only good, b) God can accomplish whatever God wills, and yet c) evil exists. If omnipotence means that God can accomplish whatever God wills, and God wills only good, then how can evil not

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<sup>5</sup> Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord, eds., *Thy Nature & Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood books, 2001).

only exist but so often prevail? Although piety and devotion may suggest that the only appropriate answer to this classic “problem of evil” or theodicy is to be silent and contemplate the mysteries of divine omnipotence and divine goodness, the truth is that particular Christian traditions often reveal consistent tendencies to be *more* silent about one or the other of these claims. There are, for example, tendencies in the Reformed tradition to stress the omnipotence of God and to assert relatively less about the benevolence of God—not of course by denial, but more typically by the claim that divine benevolence is the mystery which the human mind is incapable of probing.<sup>6</sup>

The Wesleyan tradition shows at many points a trend in the opposite direction, namely, so to defend divine goodness as to restrict, at least by implication, divine power or omnipotence. Again, this is almost never to the point of denial of omnipotence, but as I have come to see it, the restriction (however subtle) tends to be in this direction for Wesleyans, especially in their very passionate defense of the notion of divine goodness or love and their somewhat less passionate assertions, and occasionally their outright qualifications, of divine omnipotence.

This trend can be seen in John Wesley’s sermon on “Free Grace” (1740) which claims that the doctrine of predestination as divine predetermination of who will and will not be saved contradicts “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture” in which God’s benevolence for all of humankind is expressed (¶¶ 20-22), and blasphemes God and Christ by making them the authors of evil (¶¶ 23-27).<sup>7</sup> In opposition to Calvinistic Evangelicals, John Wesley described the predestinarian teaching in this 1740 sermon as an affront to God: “it represents the most holy God as worse than the devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust...”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, John Wesley’s short treatise entitled “Thoughts upon God’s Sovereignty” made a sharp distinction between God’s role as “Creator” and God’s role as “Governor,” and maintained that in the

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell, *Christian Confessions* 3.2.1 (esp. p. 146); cf. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, second edition, 1977), p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley, Sermon on “Free Grace,” ¶ 20-27 (in Jackson 8:379-384; Outler, *Sermons* 3:542-563).

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, sermon on “Free Grace,” ¶ 25 (in Outler, ed., *Sermons*, 3:555; in Jackson, ed., *Works*, 7:382).

former role God requires full justice, but in the latter role God allows the grace of divine mercy.<sup>9</sup> I read this as another way in which John Wesley would not allow that divine goodness (an expression of God's mercy) could be undermined by divine sovereignty or power.

Charles Wesley also defended divine goodness in opposition to predestination, claiming in poetry as his brother had done in prose that the notion of predestination as a divine determination of who will be damned impugns the goodness of God. The following lines from the 1740 collection of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* illustrate his poetic passion on this matter:

Was there a single soul *decreed*  
Thy unrelenting hate to know,  
Then I were he—and well might dread  
The horrors of eternal woe.

...

Whoe'er admits; my soul disowns  
the image of a tort'ring God,  
Well pleased with human shrieks and groans,  
A fiend, a Molock gorg'd with blood!

Good God! That any child of thine,  
So horribly should think of thee!  
Lo, all my hopes I here resign,  
If all may not find grace with me.<sup>10</sup>

Charles Wesley accused his predestinarian opponents of worshipping a fiendish idol (“Molock”) who intends and delights in the damnation of human beings. This strong language parallels John's sermon on “Free Grace,” preached in the same year as the collection of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in which the verses of Charles Wesley quoted above appeared.

On the positive side, Charles Wesley claimed that the very nature of God was love, “Pure UNIVERSAL LOVE.” In the poem “Wrestling Jacob” (1742), Charles Wesley depicted Jacob wrestling the mysterious stranger at Peniel (Genesis 32:24-32) as a type of the human soul wrestling with the divine. Each of the early verses of the poem concludes with the human subject asking to

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<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, “Thoughts upon God's Sovereignty” (Jackson 10:361-363).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Wesley, hymn entitled “Another” (following a hymn on “Universal Redemption”), stanzas 5, 7, and 8; in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 134 and 135; in Osborn 1:309. This is part of a series of three hymns on “Universal Redemption” in this collection, 132-142.

know the name of the mysterious stranger. This repeated question is finally answered in the following verse, in which the true name and nature of God is revealed:

'Tis love, 'tis love, thou diedst for me,  
I hear thy whisper in my heart.  
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:  
Pure UNIVERSAL LOVE thou art,  
To me, to all thy bowels move,  
thy nature and thy name is LOVE.<sup>11</sup>

9. 'Tis Love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for Me,  
I hear Thy Whisper in my Heart.  
'The Morning breaks, the Shadows flee:  
Pure UNIVERSAL LOVE Thou art,  
To me, to All Thy Bowels move,  
Thy Nature, and Thy Name is LOVE.

Each subsequent verse concludes with the line, “the nature and thy name is LOVE.” The typography utilized in this verse as it was printed in the original version of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742) is especially revealing of the strong claim that Charles Wesley made here: the expression “UNIVERSAL LOVE” was placed in small capital letters, parallel to the way in which “LORD” as a circumlocution for the unpronounceable divine name was capitalized in traditional English-language versions of the scriptures. In a similar way, Charles Wesley's original typography typically placed the name of Jesus in small capitals, as can be seen in verse 11 of this poem. In the concluding line of this verse and of every subsequent verse where “LOVE” is given as the name and nature of God, the word “LOVE” is placed in small capitals like this. So far as I know, this is quite unparalleled in Charles Wesley's work, that is, although he affirmed God's power and omnipotence, he did not take these as revealing the inward nature of God as the term “LOVE” did.

We can relate this to Charles Wesley's characteristic way of speaking about entire sanctification as an infusion of love,<sup>12</sup> as expressed in the following lines from what is perhaps

<sup>11</sup> Charles Wesley, poem entitled “Wrestling Jacob,” in John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742), 117; in Osborn, 2:175.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *John R. Tyson, Charles Wesley on Sanctification: A Biographical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 157-179.

his best known hymn on entire sanctification which speak of the infusion of divine love into a human being:

Love Divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,  
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,  
All Thy faithful mercies crown...<sup>13</sup>

This hymn wove together a number of the images that Charles Wesley used to describe entire sanctification. It is an infusion of the Holy Spirit (“thy loving Spirit”). It is the “second rest,” which follows after the new birth (the first “rest”). It removes the power of sin, and is the “end” or goal of faith (omega) as well as the beginning of faith (alpha). But love is, in the end, the fulfillment of the great commandment, that we as humans should love the LORD our God with all of our being, for love is the nature of God and the inner meaning of the godliness in which humans are to be formed by divine grace.

According to the Wesleys, then, God’s inward nature was most fully expressed as love or absolute goodness, and God’s absolute power could not be asserted at the expense of God’s goodness. This does not mean that the Wesleys themselves taught anything like divine self-limitation. But my point here is that in the tricky dialectic between asserting divine goodness and divine power, it was inevitably divine goodness that received overwhelming emphasis. Their defense of the goodness of God inspired some of their most passionate prose and poetry, and this passion in defense of divine goodness has little or no parallel in their claims about divine power. I am inclined to conclude then, that when pressed about the antinomy between divine goodness (love) and divine power, it is characteristic of Wesleyan thought to insist on the primary meaning of God as supreme goodness or love, while the meaning of divine power is not as clearly or passionately asserted.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Wesley, hymn ix, “To—Jesus, show us thy Salvation,” in Charles Wesley, *Hymns for Those that Seek, and Those that Have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* (London: Felix Farley, 1747), 13 (in Osborn, 4:219).

### **Disavowal of Divine Impassibility and the Assertion of Divine Passion**

Another ground for speaking of divine self-limitation might be found in a mysterious alteration of the first Article of Religion as it appears in the early *Disciplines* of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although the version that John Wesley sent had the traditional Anglican wording, stating that God is “without body, parts or passions,” later editions of this Article omit the reference to divine impassibility, and so affirmed only that God is “without body or parts.” It is not clear who was responsible for this omission,<sup>14</sup> but it allows the possibility of speaking of divine “passions,” in some sense. The reason for this may not be a deep mystery. Those who have seen William Hogarth’s caricature of John Wesley entitled “Credulity, Fanaticism and Superstition” will realize that “passions” were a Methodist hallmark in Wesley’s day, and it may have seemed incongruous to Methodist folk that the God of their passionate devotion should be described as existing “without passions.”

Understood in its historical context, the traditional association of impassibility with God (as it appears in the first Anglican Article of Religion) meant that God is not subject to the kinds of changeable passions to which human beings are subject. John Wesley could say that “God is a Spirit, not having such a body, such parts, or passions, as men have.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere he could speak of “baser passions,” suggesting that it is only from these kinds of passions that God is free. Recognizing this distinction of passions, some Wesleyan theologians, such as Thomas O. Summers, explicitly defended the notion of divine impassibility.<sup>16</sup>

But such a clarification of the meaning of divine impassibility should not prohibit us from seeing a distinctly Wesleyan tendency at this point, namely, the tendency to stress the

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<sup>14</sup> Ted A. Campbell, “The Mystery of the First Article of Religion, and the Mystery of Divine Passibility” (*OXFORDnotes* 4:1 [24 May 1996], p. 5).

<sup>15</sup> Sermon “On the Unity of the Divine Being,” ¶ 8 (in Jackson, 7:266; Outler, *Sermons* 4:63).

<sup>16</sup> Summers, *Systematic Theology* I:1:2:3, § 3 (in 1888 printing, 1:80-82). Cf. also contemporary Methodist authors David Bundy, in the work cited in the bibliographical notes above, p. 147, and Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 57-77, both of whom explain the appropriateness of speaking of passionlessness, in a carefully defined sense, as one aspect of the Christian’s endeavor.

vivid, compassionate personality of God. This appears in formal Methodist doctrine and theologies, but also in the spirituality expressed in Charles Wesley’s hymns:

Appeased by the charms of thy grace  
We all shall in amity join,  
And kindly each other embrace,  
And love with a passion like thine.<sup>17</sup>

The note of divine compassion for humanity appears even more strongly in popular Methodist devotion and hymnody after the Wesleys’ time. As a singular example of later Methodist piety, consider the same idea of divine compassion as it is sounded by the American Methodist hymn writer, Fanny J. Crosby:

Hear the voice that entreats you,  
O return ye unto God!  
Hear the voice that entreats you,  
O return ye unto God!  
He is of great compassion  
And of wondrous love;  
Hear the voice that entreats you,  
Hear the voice that entreats you,  
O return ye unto God!  
O return ye unto God!<sup>18</sup>

The depiction of God in hymns such as this strikes a note of sentimentality that may offend Christians of other traditions (and it may offend Methodists who think of themselves as culturally sophisticated), but it may also explain why Methodists were uncomfortable saying that God is “without passions.” The God preached by Methodists, known in personal experiences of the divine, and celebrated in their hymns was a supremely personal and compassionate God. Perhaps it is this fact that may explain why the philosophical tradition known as Personalism should have emerged in Methodist theological circles late in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley, *Hymnal* of 1780, no. 211 (in Hildebrandt and Beckerlegge, p. 345).

<sup>18</sup> Hymn of Fanny J. Crosby, in *AME Hymnal* 1984, no. 279.

<sup>19</sup> Langford, *Practical Divinity* (1998), 1:105-110, 164-166.

### Wesleyan Claims to Creaturely Freedom

A third theological ground for twentieth century Methodists who took up the notion of divine self-limitation can be found in the consistent trend on the part of Wesleyans to claim the free will of rational beings. John Wesley consistently defended the notion of creaturely freedom as necessary for the understanding of divine goodness; for example, his treatise entitled "Predestination Calmly Considered" argues that some degree of freedom is consistent a) with God's wisdom, since the plan of salvation can be understood as God's manner of dealing with free creatures; b) with God's justice, since only a free creature can be the object of justice; with and c) with God's love, since it would be unloving to consign creatures to hell for no fault of their own.<sup>20</sup> But John Wesley, it may be noted, attributed freedom of the will not only to human beings but to angels and devils as well. The spiritual world is inhabited by angels and demons, who along with human beings constitute the "rational" creation. John Wesley liked to quote Hesiod (paraphrased by Milton) to this effect:

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth  
Unseen, whether we wake, or if we sleep.<sup>21</sup>

John Wesley's sermon corpus includes a pair of sermons "Of Good Angels" and "Of Evil Angels," explicating his understanding of these rational beings who share creaturely freedom with human beings.<sup>22</sup>

The defense of creaturely freedom became a staple of Methodist teachings, distinguishing Methodists especially from Presbyterians and from predestinarian Congregationalists and Baptists. This appeared in Wesleyan works in North America as early as Nathan Bangs' *The*

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," ¶ 50-54 (in Jackson 10:232-236; Burtner and Chiles 2:B:1).

<sup>21</sup> A quotation from *Paradise Lost* iv.677-678, given in various forms: in the sermon on "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," II:1 (in Jackson 6:355; Outler, *Sermons* 2:593); in the sermon "Of Good Angels," introduction, ¶ 3 (in Jackson 6:362; Outler, *Sermons* 3:5); sermon on "The Discoveries of Faith," ¶ 6 (in Jackson 7:232; Outler, *Sermons* 4:31); sermon on "The Difference between Walking by Sight, and Walking by Faith," ¶ 5 (in Jackson 7:257; Outler, *Sermons* 4:50); "Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," ¶ 10 (in Jackson 8:5; Cragg, 11:48).

<sup>22</sup> There was a considerable body of literature available in Wesley's time speculating on the nature of angels and demons, a body of literature which Albert Outler describes in his introduction to the sermons "Of Good Angels" and "Of Evil Angels" (in *Sermons* 3:3ff.).

*Errors of Hopkinsianism* (1815), directed against new England Congregationalist Samuel Hopkins, and Wilbur Fisk's arguments in his study of *The Calvinist Controversy* (1835).<sup>23</sup> Subsequent Methodist theologians Albert Turner Bledsoe and Daniel D. Whedon defended human rationality and freedom of choice as a divine gift present in all human beings, and the necessary ground of human moral responsibility.<sup>24</sup> Bledsoe's study of *Theodicy: Or Vindication of the Divine Glory, as Manifested in the Constitution and Government of the Moral World* (1853) showed that creaturely freedom preserved the goodness of God in making sin the result of the creaturely abuse of freedom. The conclusion of the work argues directly against Calvinist claims about predestination that the divine provision for free will renders God's judgment truly just. “Hence,” Bledsoe wrote, “instead of that frightful conflict which the scheme of Calvinism presents, we behold a reconciliation and agreement among the divine attributes, worthy the great principle of order, and harmony, and beauty in the universe.”<sup>25</sup>

Robert E. Chiles saw in Bledsoe and Whedon the beginnings of a dangerous trajectory on the part of American Methodist theologians to describe creaturely freedom as a natural attribute rather than a gift of divine grace. This was not completely true of Bledsoe and Whedon, although Thomas Langford pointed out that their emphasis was on the possession of freedom on the part of all human beings, and this trended in the direction of the subsequent claims of Liberal theologians that freedom of the will was a natural attribute of all humans.<sup>26</sup> But the defense of free will (even free will as a gift of divine grace) on the part of Wesleyan theologians was seen by them as a necessary grounds for the claim of divine goodness, since freedom of the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon press, 1983), pp. 82-86.

<sup>24</sup> Langford, pp. 101-105;

<sup>25</sup> Albert T. Bledsoe, *Theodicy: Or Vindication of the Divine Glory, as Manifested in the Constitution and Government of the Moral World* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1853), pp. 361-364, quotation on p. 364; cf. Langford, pp. 102-103.

<sup>26</sup> Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism, 1790-1935* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), chapter 5, “From Free Grace to Free Will,” pp. 144-183

will delegated some of the divine power to the creature and opened the possibility of their abuse of that divinely granted power.

### **The Claims of Twentieth-Century Methodist Theologians**

In the twentieth century some Methodist theologians claimed explicitly a sense in which God is self-limited with respect to the creation. Here I will focus my comments on the American Methodist theologian Edgar Sheffield Brightman, who was trained in the philosophy of Personalism at Boston University under its first advocate, Borden Parker Bowne. Brightman would spend most of his career at Boston, mentoring, among others, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and Neo-Evangelical leader Carl F. H. Henry.<sup>27</sup> I focus on Brightman as it is widely acknowledged that one of his principal contributions to philosophy and theology was the notion of a “finite-infinite God.” Thus John Macquarie's study *of Twentieth Century Religious Thought* discusses Brightman's contribution to religious thought as lying in Brightman's reflection on the senses in which one may be able to assert faithfully that God is “limited.”<sup>28</sup>

Brightman reflected not only the particular trajectory of Boston Personalism, but also the wider development of Protestant Liberal theology in the Modernist period. His study *of The Problem of God* (1930) was published by the Abingdon Press which at that time was the name of the publishing house of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It is the principal work in which he developed this challenging idea of divine self-limitation.<sup>29</sup> The “problem of God,” as Brightman laid it out, had not only to do with the doubts of modern people about the existence of God, but also with modern concerns about the essential goodness or justice of God, since these latter

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<sup>27</sup> On Brightman's mentoring of Dr. King, see Paul Deats, “Introduction to Personalism,” in Paul Deats and Carol Robb, eds., *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology* (Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 4-5. Dr. Henry told me personally of his work with Dr. Brightman, recalling that Brightman escorted Dr. Henry on the days of the latter's graduation with the PhD degree from Boston.

<sup>28</sup> John Macquarie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM Press, fifth edition, 2001), pp 66-68.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *The Problem of God* (New York, Cincinnati, and Chicago: Abingdon Press, 1930). Brightman also dealt with these issues in a subsequent study of *The Finding of God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1931), esp. pp. 94-122.

concerns, Brightman thought, lay behind much of the agnostic tendencies in modern cultures.<sup>30</sup> The problem of suffering was not an abstract one for Brightman: his marriage to Charlotte Hülsen, whom he had met in Germany, ended tragically with Charlotte's death from cancer only three years after their wedding and a year after the birth of a son to them.

Brightman described what he called both the “expansion” and the “contraction” of the idea of God in response to modern culture. The idea of God had expanded with modern discoveries in science, astronomy, and evolution, in relation to which God had to be seen as the author of a much vaster and much more complex universe than had been imagined before.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand the idea of God had “contracted” in modern culture as more and more of the universe was explained by way of scientific discovery, leaving relatively less of the universe in the category of the mysterious and unexplained which had been commonly attributed to divine intervention in pre-modern cultures.<sup>32</sup> What Brightman described as “the resultant idea of God” that emerged out of this dialogue with modern culture was a conception of God as being “infinite” and even “omnipotent” in the sense that God has, in the words of one of Brightman's interpreters, “all the power there is except that delegated to created beings.”<sup>33</sup>

However, Brightman also argued, there is a sense in which God can be described as “limited” or “finite,” and it is in this sense that there is what Brightman described as an eternal datum or a “rational given” within God's own nature which serves as a limit to God's own power. This “Given” or datum included the immutable laws of logic and physics, especially laws of the material universe which are established in God's primordial nature and which God does not alter. As Brightman stated it by way of questions,

Can [God] choose whether the laws of reason shall be true or not? The old questions haunt us: Can he make a round triangle, a two which multiplied by two will produce six, a time prior to his own existence? Manifestly not! Rather, his eternal nature includes

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<sup>30</sup> Brightman, *The Problem of God*, pp. 13-34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-106.

<sup>33</sup> John H. Lavelly, describing Brightman's view, in “Edgar Sheffield Brightman: Good-and-Evil and the Finite-Infinite God,” in Deats and Robb, eds., *The Boston Personalist Tradition*, p. 136.

reason, never-ending activity in time, and the rich realm of The Given with which his will has to cope in the task of world building and development. His nature as a conscious being sets limits to his will; God must be finite.<sup>34</sup>

Brightman admitted that the idea of divine self-limitation was “abhorrent” upon its first consideration, but he argued that it is a more adequate understanding of the divine character as known in human religious experience, including the scriptures.

In opening the up the possibility of divine “limitation” and thus questioning the traditional view of divine omnipotence, Brightman was not willing to sacrifice any notion of divine goodness, indeed, the defense of divine goodness seems to be the motivation for his claims of divine limitation: “We believe that it is far more reasonable to deny the absolute omnipotence of the power manifesting itself in the world than to deny its goodness.”<sup>35</sup> His solution to the problem of evil was framed as a response to the issues of human suffering, which is the topic of the final chapter of *The Problem of God*.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, although Brightman framed his argument around the concerns of modern philosophy and broader modern cultures, he claimed a christological element in his view of a “limited God.” Brightman stated that,

The conception of a God limited by The Given within his own nature, yet wresting meaning from it by the achievements of his rational will, seems to account more adequately than other ideas of God for the paradoxical assertion of religious experience that its object is both a Mighty God and a Suffering Servant. It places the Cross in the eternal nature of God.<sup>37</sup>

Or as he stated it elsewhere, God “is indeed love; but a suffering love that redeems through a Cross.”<sup>38</sup> In both cases, I note, the word “Cross” is spelled with a capital letter “C,” which I take as an indication of Brightman's christological piety.

Brightman's concern for theodicy was followed by Methodist theologians John B. Cobb, Jr., and Schubert M. Ogden, who both qualify the meaning of divine omnipotence although they

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-193.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

did not accept Brightman's conception of divine self-limitation. Instead, Ogden and Cobb make a case for divine power in a very different way than that of classical theism. Cobb pointed out that even if God were thought of as being limited in power, any degree of divine power would still need to be reconciled with the assertion of God's goodness or love.<sup>39</sup> Cobb's own response, following the thought of Charles Hartshorne, is to qualify the meaning of divine power: divine power cannot be coercive power; rather, it must be a persuasive power:

If we think, then, of God's power as persuasive power, we may still use the term “omnipotence” if we like, but its meaning is quite altered... It means instead that [God] exercises the optimum persuasive power in relation to whatever is. Such an optimum is a balance between urging toward the good and maximizing the power—therefore the freedom—of the one whom God seeks to persuade.<sup>40</sup>

Schubert Ogden also resists the notion of “limitation” or self-limitation within God and makes the case for a qualification of the notion of omnipotence. Ogden affirms a premise of process philosophy, that “nothing whatever, not even God, can wholly determine the being of someone else.” All beings are to some degree self-created as well as created by their interaction with other beings. This perspective allows Ogden to understand that

even the greatest possible power over others—even the omnipotent power than which no greater power can be conceived—could not be all the power there is but only all the power that any one actual thing could be conceived to have, consistently with there being other actual things having lesser power over which its omnipotent power could alone be exercised.

Put differently, for process philosophy and theology, the concept of “power,” just like every other fundamental concept, is by its very meaning social, in that it necessarily presupposes relations between distinct individuals each of which does and must have some power to create both itself and others.<sup>41</sup>

In his own way, then, Ogden conceives of power and divine omnipotence parallel to that expressed by Cobb, according to which divine power interacts with the free agency of creatures,

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<sup>39</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 88. Cobb does not explicitly name Brightman at this point but his account seems clearly enough oriented towards Brightman's idea of “the theory of [God's] limited power.”

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, *God and the World*, pp. 87-102 generally; the quotation is on p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, “Evil and Belief in God: The Distinctive Relevance of a ‘Process Theology’” (*Perkins School of Theology Journal* 31 [1978]): 29-34; quotations on pp. 32 and 32-33.

and the classical notion of divine omnipotence is seen as a mistaken “pseudo-conception.”<sup>42</sup> What I find fascinating in all of these twentieth-century Methodist theologians—Brightman, Cobb, and Ogden—is that all of them in one way or another need to qualify the claim of divine power, and none of them seem to have any interest in qualifying the claims of divine benevolence or love.

### **Conclusions**

Brightman was, and Ogden, and Cobb are, heirs of the Wesleyan theological tradition, and Ogden and Cobb have both acknowledged explicitly the role of the Wesleyan tradition in shaping their understandings of God. But these connections to the Wesleyan tradition have not always been made clear—especially in the work of Brightman and others of the Boston school. It seems to me that by the early twentieth century, many philosophers and theologians had come to see the emphasis on divine goodness, the claim of divine passibility or passion, and the defense of creaturely freedom as elements of common, progressive modern Christianity rather than distinctive elements of the Wesleyan theological tradition. Thus it may be the case that although Brightman had been formed as a Methodist and this formation, with its strong emphases on creaturely freedom, divine passibility, and divine goodness, lay in the background rather than the foreground of his development of the idea of divine self-limitation.

And yet, although Brightman did not make the connection to the Wesleyan tradition as clear as Ogden and Cobb did, I must confess that I am consistently more attracted to his notion of divine self-limitation than the re-conceptions of divine power offered by Ogden or Cobb. For one thing, Brightman's claim of divine self-limitation was refreshingly honest. He himself admitted that the claim was “abhorrent” on his first consideration of it, and somehow that strikes me as a mark of genuine intellectual honesty. I remain quite uncomfortable with Brightman's speaking of the divine limitation as “The Given” that exists within God. But it is the christological connection, and specifically the connection with atonement theory, that makes Brightman's

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34, where the phrase “pseudo-conception” is applied repeatedly to classical understandings of divine omnipotence.

conception of divine self-limitation most attractive from the standpoint of Wesleyan doctrinal theology. The atonement means divine self-limitation in the event of Jesus Christ:

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness (Philippians 2:6-7, NRSV).

However unorthodox it may sound, self-giving self-limitation strikes me as a genuinely appropriate way to express the central meaning of atonement and behind this, the meaning of the claim that God is, in the end, love.

The assertion of divine self-limitation attempts to respond to one of the core issues in theistic belief. The Revelation to St. John the Divine, we might recall, was addressed to a persecuted and suffering Christian community. Questions about the essential goodness of God could not have been far from their hearts, just as they cannot be far from the hearts of any religious believer exposed to present suffering. I myself would prefer to say that although God is limited by nothing except by God's own self or being, God has limited God's own self by sharing a degree of power with the creation—the material creation as well as the “rational” creation that involves conscious freedom of choice. This would allow us to say that God participates in all suffering, even if God does not intend suffering on the part of God's beloved creatures. It might allow us to claim, as Brightman himself suggested, that the form of God we know is cruciform, the eternal one who made the heavens and the earth is mysteriously also “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”