
John Wesley and the Plurality of Worlds

by Ivan L. Zabilka

I am always reassured when I find my theological mentors accurate and sensible relating to a topic about which I have some specialized knowledge. This tends to lend weight to the mentor's thought in areas with which I am less familiar. This type of confirmation recently came to me in connection with John Wesley, whose sermons I have admired.

The "plurality of worlds" is the pre-twentieth century name for the idea that there are other planets with intelligent inhabitants. The idea has an ancient history running all the way back to the fifth century B.C. Greek atomists.¹ The idea remained obscure until the 16th century Copernican Revolution in Astronomy, and the 17th century scientific revolution in general. Seventeenth century scholars found the plurality useful to promote knowledge of the "New Astronomy," and many other scientific works discussed the plurality.² The new literary form, the novel, also conveniently included the plurality as a popular theme. In the 18th century the plurality proved useful for social and political criticism, as well as its earlier scientific use.³ The popularity of the idea promoted a strong desire among Christians to make the idea of a plurality compatible with the Christian faith. An ancient Aristotelian concept, the Principle of Plenitude, provided a means of accomplishing this objective. The Principle of Plenitude was the concept that the "world" was a full one, that is, not barren. Christians associated fullness with God's goodness, leading to the position that a barren planet would imply incompleteness and a failure to measure up to God's goodness.

There was a problem attendant upon this argument, however, for there was an immediate soteriological complication. Were the inhabitants of other planets pure? This seemed to contradict the Fall. Were they sinful? This created problems with regard to how they

Ivan Zabilka, a 1965 alumnus of Asbury Theological Seminary, is Assistant Registrar at the University of Missouri — Columbia.

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would know about Christ's sacrifice here. If other beings did not know of the salvation Christ provided here, the ultimate fear was that Christ would have to go to each planet to provide salvation. This logical possibility seemed to conflict with the idea that Christ's sacrifice here was complete and once-for-all.

The most common means of avoiding all these problems prior to Wesley's time was simply to avoid them and emphasize plenitude, or to do as Bernard de Fontenelle did. Fontenelle was probably the most influential of all early writers upon the plurality.⁴ A French scientific gadfly, Fontenelle had no particular love for the Church, but he did not want to be bothered with controversy, so he simply proposed that the inhabitants were different in every way from humans. This position rather ineffectually sidestepped the issue.

Some of the more belligerent foes of the Church were not so kind. They believed that Christian doctrines could be made foolish by proposing a horrible scene of Christ endlessly dying on planet after planet. Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* was the culmination of this trend, but his work appeared a few years after Wesley's death.⁵ Wesley related to the earlier writers prior to Paine.

The only other theologian contemporary with Wesley who wrote upon the plurality was Emanuel Swedenborg, who published a work in 1758 that purported to be accounts of personal trips to other planets where he conversed with the inhabitants.⁶ Interestingly enough, he travelled to none of the outer planets that had not been discovered in his day. Swedenborg fit with the general Christian atmosphere which favored the plurality.

In the midst of this environment, Wesley saw no visions but gave a straightforward rational presentation of the significance of the plurality. In his sermon "What is Man?" Wesley sought to resolve what he regarded as a standard philosophical rejection of the Atonement on the basis that it made the Earth the object of special regard.⁷ Wesley understood that the popular belief was in thousands of worlds, many of them much larger than ours, but for Wesley not necessarily more important. Despite the existence of these worlds, Wesley doubted that they had to be inhabited until stronger proof was given. If the plurality *had* to be granted, then Wesley retreated to the position that in the unfathomable mind of God there might be a reason why ours was the world selected for special attention. As support for his skeptical position with regard to life, Wesley

drew upon Christian Huygens, the Dutch scientist, who had expressed doubt about the habitability of the Moon. Wesley at this point was referring to the author of the most comprehensive and scientifically sound treatise upon the plurality of worlds up to that time.⁸

Wesley further asserted that there was no positive proof with regard to the other planets, a statement that remains true to our own day. Wesley contended that the burden of proof rested with the believers in the plurality. Here he contested with Huygens who sought to place the burden of proof on the disbelievers. Of course, physical proof on either side of the question was impossible in the 1700's.

Wesley also claimed that God could create what he pleased, and need not be bound by the Principle of Plenitude. Whatever the moral situation on other planets, undue attention to those conditions could distract from God's intention to deal with sinful men on this planet. For Wesley, the plurality was a vain speculation, and the needed debate was how to apply Christian principles to the problem of sin and its social consequences.

In a second work, which was a compendium of science in the popular style of the self-educating books of the day, Wesley was less negative toward the plurality.⁹ Wesley exhibited his wide reading in the current astronomical works. In his summary of the ideas of the ancients, which included comment on the plurality, Wesley let the ancient ideas stand without comment. The implication was that Wesley was not hostile to the idea of a plurality except as it served as a basis for agnosticism toward the work of God in the world, which was more important than anything else to Wesley.

Following Paine's attack, early 19th century Christian writers proposed several alternatives to the ugly picture of Christ on thousands (and now millions) of crosses. They suggested that knowledge of Christ's death here was somehow transmitted to other planets; that perhaps the Fall was a local phenomena. But in the end, some conceded that even if Christ has to die over and over, there was an eternity for him to accomplish it.¹⁰

Almost strangely, Christian thought about the plurality has advanced little since Wesley's time. No adequate answer to the soteriological problems is possible if there are indeed intelligent beings "out there." Modern thought about extra-terrestrial life is based upon planetary environments, cosmological theory which is in

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a state of flux, evolutionary theory which is being investigated more critically even by its friends, and probability studies of the likelihood of planets around stars. The study of extraterrestrial life forms (exobiology) is the only “science” known where the existence of the subject matter is uncertain.

Wesley’s skepticism seems appropriate for us as well. We can wisely wait for a bit more evidence before we firmly cast our opinions about the soteriological problems that would result. Wesley’s concern that the plurality distract us from the issue of man’s sin here seems almost prophetic. All around us we can find the messianic hope that alien creatures will be benign, superior, and helpful in solving the ills of this world. But occasionally in science fiction, and even when radio telescopic messages are considered, there lurks the fear that the aliens may be evil, superior, and destroy us. The residual traces of our Christian past linger in secular writings as both an extraterrestrial millennial longing, and a burning, Earth-ending cataclysm. Why not wait just a bit longer with Wesley for a little more convincing evidence? ■

Footnotes

¹Democritus and others believed a “world” was all that was visible to the eye. They, therefore, believed in a plurality of worlds that were invisible to us.

²John Wilkins, a founder of the Royal Society, and an Anglican Bishop wrote upon the plurality. Christian Huygens and other “naturalists” considered it. Popular writers such as Cyrano de Bergerac were a third type of author interested in the plurality.

³The great satire was Jonathan Swift’s *Travels of Lemuel Gulliver*. At least seventeen copies of *Gulliver* followed which involved journeys to remote planets. Most were unsuccessful satires.

⁴Bernard de Fontenelle, *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (London: Thomas Caslon, 1767). Second ed. Trans. by a gentleman of the Inner-Temple.

⁵*The Age of Reason* was first published in 1794 and has since gone through dozens of editions, printings and reprintings.

⁶Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* and a derivative work entitled *The Earths in Our Solar System* (London, 1758).

⁷John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, VII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, n.d.). Reprint of the 1872 London edition of the Wesleyan Conference, p. 172.

⁸Christian Huygens, *The Celestial Worlds Discovered or Conjectures Concerning the Inhabitants* (London, 1698). pp. 128ff.

⁹John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God* . . . (Philadelphia: Jonathan Paunder, 1816). 2 Vols., Second American ed., notes by B. Mayo. Examples of his knowledge of the Ptolemaic, Copernican and Cartesian systems appears on page 114 of Volume I. Awareness of Bradley, Molyneux and other contemporary astronomers appears on pages 134-135.

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¹⁰The most comprehensive of these was Thomas Chalmers, *Discourses on the Christian Revelation Viewed in Connexion with Modern Astronomy* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.). This book appeared sometime in the 1820's.