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*Assessing Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism: An Open Dialogue with T. A. Noble, Dennis Kinlaw, Allan Coppedge, and William Ury*

**Abstract:**

This review essay analyses three works by Wesleyan theologians: T. A. Noble's *Christian Theology, Volume 1*, and two contributions from the Francis Asbury Society: *Christology as Theology* by William M. Ury and *Trinitarian Theology* by Allan Coppedge, which articulate Christocentric Theism and Trinitarian Theism. While appreciating some aspects of these approaches, the essay raises critical concerns: the tendency to minimize the role of progressive revelation, the need for greater attention to divine accommodation and pedagogy, the danger of collapsing theology into a narrow Christonomism, and the risk of cultural insularity in global contexts. The article contributes to ongoing dialogue within Wesleyan theology, cautioning against methodological imbalances.

**Key Words:** Christocentric theism, Trinitarian theism, Wesleyan theology, divine accommodation, missions

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## Introduction

In recent years, Wesleyan theologians have written works from the perspectives of Christocentric Theism and Trinitarian Theism. Christocentric Theism places Jesus Christ at the starting point and center of theological reflection. Thus, it entails interpreting revelation through the lens of Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection. The Christocentric approach begins with Jesus and uses Christology as an interpretive lens through which to understand all of revelation.

Trinitarian Theism posits the triune nature of God as the key to understanding divine revelation and work in the world. The Trinitarian theists, as identified in this essay, hold that the fullest revelation of the Trinity occurred in the coming of Christ; thus, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes the foundation for Christian worship and belief and is the lens for comprehending other doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

These two approaches to the theological enterprise are integrally connected. While holding to the ontological Trinity, the proponents stress the noetic unfolding of the Trinity; the revelation of God in Christ reveals the Triune nature of God. As T.A. Noble asserts, only when one kneels and confesses with Thomas "My Lord and my God!" (Jo. 20:28) can one begin to believe in the Triune God (Noble 2022:77). Thus, the advent or the resurrection of Christ reveals the Trinity.

This review essay proposes to summarize recent publications from Wesleyan publishers, which advance Christocentric Theism and Trinitarian Theism. The two principal projects are T. A. Noble's *Christian Theology, Volume 1: The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* and Francis Asbury Publication's publication of a systematic theology, *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*. Later, it will analyze and raise questions about these approaches to theology.

## Noble's *Christian Theology*

In 2022, The Foundry, the publishing arm of the Church of the Nazarene, published T. A. Noble's *Christian Theology, Volume 1*, which entails three parts: one on "Faith and History," the second on "Christology: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ," and the third on "Soteriology: The Doctrine of the Work of Christ." The work is a *tour de force* with over 1,000 pages.

Wesleyan theology, as influenced by the Wesley brothers, was not sectarian, Noble insists. He aims to set out "an Integrative Theology in the

Wesleyan tradition" (Noble 2022: xxii). The overall aim is "to articulate the Theology which is common to the whole Church as it is seen at the beginning of the twenty-first century of the Christian era" (Noble 2022: xxii).

Dr. Noble deviates from what he considers the traditional presentation of systematic theologies by avoiding discussions of theology proper and a theological epistemology. His starting point in his work is Christology. According to Noble, Christology holds the key to theology and divine revelation. In discussing his methodology, Noble makes a surprising statement: "...any doctrine of God that takes its starting point elsewhere [anywhere other than Christology] or is determined otherwise, will be less than fully Christian" (Noble 2022: 296).<sup>2</sup> He employs the order of 2 Cor. 16:14, rather than the order of the baptismal formula in Matt. 28:18f. (e.g. Father, Son, Spirit), to provide the structure for his unfolding theological system. Thus, Noble's volumes unfold in a Trinitarian structure beginning with Christology: volume one is subtitled "The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ"; volumes two and three will be entitled "The Love of God" and "The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (Noble 2022: xxii).

Having distinguished his approach from the traditional structure, he indicates several disadvantages of the traditional order. First, theologians tend to "derive the doctrine of God" from other sources such as philosophical theism or philosophical ontology (Noble 2022: 75). Secondly, theologians tend to heighten the doctrine of the unity of God while relegating the doctrine of the Trinity to "an inferior status" (Noble 2022: 76). Thirdly, the traditional approach tends to equate God "solely or almost exclusively with the Father" (Noble 2022: 76). As a result, and fourthly, there is a tendency "to demote Christ with a subtle and hidden (or not-so-hidden) Arianism" (Noble 2022: 76). Noble concludes his list of the disadvantages of the traditional structure of theology with a fifth point: "...in other cases there may be a truly Christian belief in the Triune God but a misguided attempt to contrast a Trinitarian Theology with a Christocentric Theology" (Noble 2022: 76).<sup>3</sup>

After outlining the limitations of the traditional theological structure, the author turns to the benefits of starting theology with Christ. First, this approach grounds Christian theology directly in the message of the Gospel, rather than beginning with abstract philosophical ideas or the history of God's dealings with Israel (Noble 2022: 77). Second, it avoids the often-tiring practice of addressing questions "of theological epistemology

as ‘prolegomena’” (Noble 2022: 77). Third, it removes the need to start with discussions on theological methods, which are typically tied closely to epistemological concerns (Noble 2022: 78). Fourth, structuring theology this way aligns it more closely with the Bible and enhances its relevance for evangelism, worship, and the global mission of the Church (Noble 2022: 78). Lastly, by building theology around the Gospel rather than Enlightenment-era philosophical issues, the author hopes to create a framework that resonates more deeply with churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Noble 2022: 79).

Before evaluating Noble’s arguments, let’s look at another publishing venture in Christocentric theism.

### **Kinlaw and the Francis Asbury Society**

In 2024, Francis Asbury Press published the first two of five volumes in a series entitled *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw brought together a group of scholars for a collaborative effort of writing a systematic theology in the Wesleyan tradition, which took “nearly a quarter of a century” (Ury 2024: 7). Kinlaw’s predilections have shaped the work: 1) a high regard for the integrity of scripture; 2) “orthodoxy and orthopraxy ought always to be held concomitantly” (Ury 2024: 8); 3) contributors of the Asbury University or Asbury Theological Seminary ilk; and, 4) the purpose and mission of the Francis Asbury Society. The first two volumes have been published: *Christology as Theology* by William M. Ury and *Trinitarian Theology* by Allan Coppedge. The projected volumes are *Cosmology, Bibliology, Pneumatology, and Anthropology* (vol. 3) by John N. Oswalt, Gareth Lee Cockerill, Matthew I. Ayars, and Dennis F. Kinlaw; *Hamartiology, Soteriology, and Predestination* (vol. 4) by John N. Oswalt, Allan Coppedge, and Thomas H. McCall; and *Ecclesiology and Eschatology* (vol. 5) by Steve Blakemore and Christopher T. Bounds (FAS Bookstore).

Dr. Ronald E. Smith, who was at the time of writing the president of the Francis Asbury Society, authored the “Foreword” of Ury’s *Christology as Theology*. He specifies three books that were influential in shaping the thought of the contributors. The first was Kinlaw’s work, *Let’s Start with Jesus: A New Way of Doing Theology* (2007), an inciting, pungent title, which captures one of the central convictions of the Christocentric approach and which encapsulated the agenda for the collaborative project. Like Noble’s work, Kinlaw promulgates Christocentric Theism.<sup>4</sup> His thesis is that Christ is the norm for personhood, revealing both divine personhood

and human personhood. The same theme is “more exhaustively researched and reported” in Ury’s *Trinitarian Personhood: Investigating the Implications of a Relational Definition* (Ury 2024: 10). This second influential resource posits “that the Social Trinity is the metaphysical reality for humanity’s relational existence” (Ury 2024: 10-11). In addition, Oswalt’s work, *Called to Be Holy*, has shaped the new series as well.

### **Ury’s Christology as Theology**

The key resource in the series for developing the Christocentric foundation is William M. Ury’s contribution to volume one, *Christology as Theology*. In chapter 1, “The Cornerstone,” Ury addresses the methodology for Christocentric Theism; like Noble, Ury avoids beginning with a prolegomena but begins instead with Christology. He emphasizes the centrality of Christ to all of reality and revelation. Ury states the orientation of his work: “Scripture seeks to introduce us to the marvel of Trinitarian reality through the Son. If what we have said thus far is true, then it is logical that theology must find its origin in Jesus” (Ury 2024: 41).<sup>5</sup> Christology is central to theology because the Eternal Son of God *became* the Son of Man at a precise point in human history. Thus, Christ is the fullest revelation and embodiment of the Triune God, and he incarnates human personhood, embodying and exemplifying what it means to be human.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is the “way” (John 14:6) to the life of the Triune God. Only through Christology can one understand the Trinity.

Ury’s “Christological Methodology” “presupposes that the God-Man, Jesus, must inform a true and personal theological agenda” (Ury 2024: 42). Thus, he does not begin with the Fatherhood of God as do the creeds; they simply presume the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son. (Ury 2024: 43). Ury argues that Christ is the consummation of revelation (Ury 2024: 45). Yet, since the seventeenth century, the history of theology has demonstrated the diminishment of the person of Christ in the face of which Ury seeks to reassert an orthodox Christology.

### **Coppedge’s Trinitarian Theology**

The second volume of the *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* series is *Trinitarian Theology* by Allan Coppedge, a longtime professor at Asbury Theological Seminary.<sup>7</sup> Francis Asbury Press abridged Coppedge’s previous monograph, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, which was published in 2007 (Coppedge

2007).<sup>8</sup> *The God Who is Triune* was designed to be one in the volumes of the series; however, Coppedge “jumped the gun” in publishing well before the other writers in the project.

In this work, Coppedge reflects Trinitarian Theism, which is intricately connected to Christocentric Theism. In the first sentence of his introduction, Coppedge asserts, “It is time to return to Jesus as the center of the Christian faith!” (Coppedge 2007: 13). Christ’s centrality in Christian thought entailed a shift from Judaism’s strict monotheism to trinitarian faith; however, the author begins with the divine plurality and then broaches the unity of God. The author emphasizes his theme: “The overarching approach of this book is to look at Jesus as the theological beginning to understanding the nature of the triune God, a trinitarian focus that sets the stage for knowing his attributes and his economic roles in relationship to the world” (Coppedge 2007: 237). Coppedge underscores an inextricable link between faith in Christ and faith in the Triune God: he asserts, “to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a disciple of the triune God” (Coppedge 2024: 24).

Coppedge endeavors to distinguish Trinitarian Theism from classical theism. The starting points differ: classical theism begins with the oneness of God, whereas Trinitarian Theism begins with the three-ness of God (Coppedge 2007: 17). Further, Trinitarian theism serves as a middle way between the perceived lack of relationality in classical theism, according to Coppedge, and the emphasis on relationality of open theism because Trinitarian Theism begins with the eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity, the *perichoresis* (Coppedge 2007: 134), and since God is the source of all of creation, all of reality reflects Trinitarian relationality. Coppedge expands the treatment of biblical studies of the Trinity to include, not only the passages mentioning the three persons of the Trinity, but also explores the passages dealing with two persons of the Trinity and the Trinitarian literary structures reflected in books of the Bible because he believes that the discussion adds to the incomplete picture reflected in classical studies (Coppedge 2007: 25ff.; Coppedge 2024: 11ff.). Trinitarian Theism signals a shift in divine attribution:

When Jesus introduced God as Father, this changed his disciples’ perspective on God’s sovereignty. The emphasis shifted from God’s relative attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, wisdom) to his personal (sociality, life, reason, imagination, emotions, will, freedom, responsibility, creativity) and moral attributes (holiness and love expressed in righteousness, truth,

purity, grace and goodness). ... However, ...the trinitarian perspective... begins with God as Father, the relative attributes (e.g., omnipotence) are subordinate to the personal attributes (e.g., freedom) and moral attributes (e.g., love, righteousness, goodness). *The coming of the Son of the Father has irrevocably altered our view of God and his providence* (Coppedge 2007: 306).<sup>9</sup>

Here, Coppedge's Trinitarian Theism is on full display. One of the major concerns of *The God Who Is Triune* is to provide a polemic against the classic theism's (in the tradition of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin) views of divine providence and sovereignty, open and process theism (Coppedge 2007: 320). Trinitarian Theism, avoiding the fatalistic and deterministic views of classic theology, provides a freer and more relational understanding of God and humanity. In this manner, Coppedge re-visions the Christian doctrine of God as the subtitle of his earlier book suggests.

### **Assessing Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism**

#### *Strengths of Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism*

Having summarized the salient points of Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism, I will elaborate on some of their strengths. First, Christocentric and Trinitarian Theists have attempted to address the claims of the "cultural despisers" whose thinking was influenced by the Enlightenment, resulting in a diminished role of Christ in recent Christian thought. Both Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism attempt to restore Christ to his rightful place at the center of the theological enterprise. The next point is related to the present one.

Proponents of Trinitarian and Christocentric Theism are advocates of the Nicene Creed and other significant orthodox settlements on Christology. Such proponents attempt to restore the role of the Nicene Creed and to demonstrate its relevance in light of the devaluing of Christology due to the influence of the Enlightenment worldview.<sup>10</sup> Christocentric theologians attempt to restore the role of the Nicene tradition in the faith of the Church.

Dr. Thomas McCall writes the preface, "A Trinitarian Theology of Holiness," in which he addresses the question of whether or not the contributors to the *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* series are proponents of "Social Trinitarianism." McCall regards the term "Social Trinitarianism" as ambiguous and problematic and is concerned about

the projections of tritheism on the project; however, the contributors “are committed to the belief that mutual holy love is shared between and among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for we are convinced that the life of the Trinity is a life of holy love” (Ury 2024: 20). Thus, the writers of the FAS project attempt to avoid Social Trinitarianism.

Another positive characteristic of the Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism is its focus on the fundamental relationality of all of reality. The Triune God is the Creator of all things, and all of creation reflects the relationality of the inner life of the Trinity. Jesus, as the Eternal Son, is the embodiment of divine personhood and, as the Son of Mary, is the embodiment of human personhood. Kinlaw provides a definition of human personhood grounded in the person of Christ, which reflects the following characteristics: consciousness of identity, capable of a web of relationships, reciprocity, freedom, moral consciousness, openness, and trusting love (Kinlaw 2005: 79-101). Thus, full human personhood is reflected in the life of Jesus. Christlikeness becomes the goal of the restoration of human beings in the image of God. Hence, Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism provide a solid foundation for a relational theology of holiness.

### *Concerns about Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism*

Despite the many commendable features of Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism, it raises several concerns and questions. I express concerns below about Christocentric and Trinitarian theists’ methodology or procedures. However, the concerns are not merely methodological or procedural, but they have broader implications for theology and practical ministry, particularly missions and pastoral theology.

#### *The Order of Revelation*

In his book *The God Who Is Triune*, Dr. Coppedge discusses the differences in the Old and New Testaments and the differing ways of reading the scripture; in this context, he distinguishes between the “order of knowing” and the “order of being.” The former is defined as “how God unfolds his revelation in a progressive way through time and history” (Coppedge 2007: 54). In his explanation, he stresses the role of progressive revelation and that the knowledge of each era must be understood in light of previous revelations and of the historical context of the recipients, with their measure of revelation. Coppedge, then, defines “the order of being” as follows: “The order of being is holistic; it is God’s overarching truth derived

from all Scriptures" (Coppedge 2007: 54). The order of knowing unveils the order of being.<sup>11</sup> The order of being is truth from the vantage point of full revelation; it is comprehending all the history of revelation in the light of total revelation. Coppedge applies these two concepts to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The parallel with the Trinity is obvious. There were some things that God was saying about the plurality of his own being that were vaguely or not at all understood under the old covenant. But in light of the incarnation and Pentecost, God's revelation is much more explicit, so now we read what he said earlier in a fuller light (Coppedge 2007: 56).

I must make an important point about the use of language; the typical theological language does not serve Coppedge well at this juncture. What Coppedge calls the "order of knowing" would be better termed the "order of revelation." "Order of knowing" places stress upon the recipients of revelation. However, Coppedge's own definition addresses "how God unfolds his revelation..." (Coppedge 2007: 54). My point is that the manner and timing of unfolding is *God's* doing. God has chosen to reveal himself, as the Hebrew writer put it, "through the prophets at many times and in various ways..."<sup>12</sup> The unfolding of history is God's doing; thus, the terminology "order of revelation" is more suitable than the "order of knowing." The "order of knowing" makes the phrase anthropocentric; the term "order of revelation" renders the concept theocentric in line with Coppedge's description. Of course, the Hebrew writer continues to emphasize that Christ is the apex of revelation, the exact impression, representation, and embodiment of God: "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:2, NIV). The latter revelation, though infinitely superior, should not undermine the previous revelation, no matter how piecemeal, fragmentary, and incomplete it might be. The immensely greater value of God's revelation in Christ does not invalidate the previous revelation.

#### *The Accommodated God*

Noble makes a similar point as Coppedge did in the above citations:

And while Christians believe that *ontologically* (in the order of being), God was the Holy Trinity from all eternity, long before the Incarnation of the Son, yet *noetically* (in the order of knowing) the *doctrine* of the Trinity is grounded in Christology. Until we kneel before the risen Lord with Thomas and say, 'My Lord and my God,' there is no reason to confess God to be Triune (Noble 2022: 77).

Here again, increased precision is required. Rather than asserting that "the *doctrine* of the Trinity is grounded in Christology," it would be more precise to claim a wider scope of history for divine revelatory activity; that is, the full-orbed doctrine of the Trinity was revealed to human beings in God's self-disclosure throughout revelation history. History is sequential; it is chronological and pedagogical. The Christological approach – that God was revealed in Christ – presumes the existence of God and a prior knowledge of God. For example, the titles, "Lord" and "God", that Thomas used in this declaration, which Noble quoted in the above citation, have long histories in the faith of the community of Israel, which give meaning to his confession.

Furthermore, the history of divine revelation includes not only the Christ event but also Pentecost. As H. Ray Dunning asserts, "Early Christians, for instance, experienced God in a threefold way. They encountered Him as always and everywhere (Father); as there and then (in Jesus Christ); and as here and now (Holy Spirit). This experience is what gave rise to the doctrine of the Trinity" (Dunning 1988:90). While Dunning's statement in agreement with Christocentric Theism underscores a specific vantage point, it also underscores the unfolding of the order of revelation and a vantage point that is historically subsequent to the life of Christ. That is, after Pentecost, the early Church had the best vantage point, as the fullest divine revelation, for understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. The Catechism of *The Book of Common Prayer* reflects this history of divine revelation as reflected in personal experience: "First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the World. Secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind. Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God" (*Book of Common Prayer* 1892: 283).

### *The Divine Pedagogy*

One of the challenges for Christocentric Theism is the tendency to ignore divine pedagogy; it seemingly ignores the way that God has revealed

himself progressively throughout salvation history to human beings. This issue raises the doctrine of accommodation, the idea that God has, in love, accommodated himself in history to the finite limitations of human understanding in order to reveal himself fully.<sup>13</sup>

In the two previous sections, I attempted to keep the focus on God's revelation to human beings. That is, God has chosen to accommodate himself to humanity to reveal himself fully. God has accommodated himself to the frailties, limitations, and sinfulness of human beings, but that does not mean that the doctrine is anthropocentric because God is at the center of revelation, dispensing revelation in the measure that human beings can apprehend it.

Educationists insist upon the importance of sequence in learning; in common parlance, one says, "You must learn to crawl before you can walk." In the same way, knowledge about God has a specific sequence to it; divine accommodation occurs within history and must unfold sequentially due to human frailties and sinfulness. To ignore the sequence of accommodation is to ignore the grace-filled sovereignty of God in dispensing revelation in measures that human beings are capable of apprehending. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) provide a theological basis for the grace-full sovereignty of God in dispensing grace.

Therefore, there is a pedagogical sequence ordained by God commensurate with the finite human capacities. In his response to critics, Dr. Noble doubles down on his Christocentric way of knowing: "That is why I believe that following the order of knowing is pedagogically preferable to following the order of being."<sup>14</sup> Though Noble insists that the Christological approach is "pedagogically preferable," his assertion does not seem to align with human experience. In his book *The Orphean Passages: The Drama of Faith*, Walter Wangerin, Jr., a Lutheran pastor and award-winning writer, recounts the story of the fictional Reverend Orpheus who undergoes six stages of faith. Before becoming known as Reverend Orpheus, the little Orphay encountered the Holy Other:

...the sky has a thousand moods; and behind them, within them, something – no, a Someone – commands and cares for them. Someone orders all things, for doesn't the child himself always feel the presence of a greater Other in control of them, too? – and so of all things? ...And though, at first, the child has no name for this Someone so Significant, this Other, the Dear, or else

the Terrible Almighty (*El-Shaddai!*), yet the holiness and glory, the power and even righteousness of the Other are very real to him – and the love may wax and wane, depending upon the child's own sense of goodness and his health. It is the common lot of all children to encounter and to experience the Deity. And so faithing begins. And because it begins in children, regardless of their cultures, regardless of what languages shall later contain, explain and edit reality for them – because it begins, in fact, apart from the interpretive function of language – faithing, we may say, is not unique to a few people: it is at least initiated in all. It is a universal human experience. We have all danced one round with God. (Wangerin 1986: 21-22)

So, little Orphay encounters the Creator, the Wholly Other and only later does he find a name or the language to “frame his experience” (Wangerin 1986: 23).<sup>15</sup> My point here is that the noetic order of human experience of the divine begins with the Creator or Holy Other.<sup>16</sup> God accommodates himself to humanity and reveals himself through general revelation.<sup>17</sup>

As pointed out in the above section, the typical order of the history of divine revelation is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Classical theology assumes a particular order in the systematic exposition of theology. Thomas C. Oden's three-volume work, *Systematic Theology*, is typical: he discusses the doctrine of theology proper in the first volume, *The Living God*; the second volume discusses Christology under the title *The Word of Life*, and the third volume focuses on the doctrine of the Spirit entitled *Life in the Spirit*. Additionally, and more importantly, the creeds of the Church unfold in a chronological order, that is, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.<sup>18</sup>

While the typical order of structuring theology has been noted, it is not uniform in the Christian tradition. Dr. Noble, in an article “Our Knowledge of God according to John Calvin,” points out that in Calvin's thought the order is reversed: “...the noetic order is from Redemption to Creation – only by faith in the Redeemer can we know him as our Creator, and it was the noetic approach which had characterized Calvin's theology” (Noble 1982: 13). Federal theologians have recognized an analogy between the *ordo temporum* and the *ordo salutis*. According to van Asselt's understanding of Johannes Cocceius' theology, the *ordo temporum* is the objective, extrinsic divine revelation which “proceeds linear-historically, from beginning to end, and from the preceding to the subsequent” (van Asselt 2001: 297). The *ordo salutis* is the sequential, subjective application of

the salvation of believers, which is analogous, for federal theologians, with the *ordo temporum*.<sup>19</sup> In the monograph, *True Christianity: The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*, I underscored John Fletcher's analogy between the *ordo temporum* and the *ordo salutis*. Fletcher described the unfolding salvation history in three eras: the dispensations of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.<sup>20</sup> These three dispensations are analogous to the development in the lives of believers who are recipients of the complete revelation of God. I pointed out that the early Methodist order of salvation is the opposite of that of John Calvin's.

...in Fletcher's thought the order is reversed. Against Calvin's noetic order, Fletcher would insist that knowledge of the Creator is prior to knowledge of the Redeemer because, for example, it is impossible for one to have an awareness of the need to repent of offending God without an awareness of divine existence. Whereas Calvin's system overrides any personal or salvation history by divine fiat, Fletcher's order respects the historical sequence of divine revelation (Frazier 2015: 77).

Christological Theism seems to align with Calvin's order of revelation rather than with that of early Methodism.

#### *Ahistorical Orientation*

Wesley held that written histories were instructive and wrote or edited several different histories to provide "an explanation of the providence of God within history displaying divine wisdom in God's interactions with human beings." (Frazier 2009: 34). During the Minute controversy with the Calvinists, John Wesley, along with John William Fletcher, attempted to defend the universal extent of the atonement; Wesley had "to demonstrate the atonement's extent not only for all persons who were alive in his day but for all human beings who had ever lived since the beginning of time" (Frazier 2009: 36). The questions were two: a geographical question and a historical question. Was the atonement efficacious only for those who lived after the death of Christ? Is God the God of the heathen as well as the God of Christians? Was the atonement efficacious for Abraham, for example, who was the father of faith, but who did not know of the ministry and atoning work of Christ? Wesley recognized the implications of the doctrine of

universal atonement and developed what, in eighteenth-century language, might be called a “doctrine of the heathen” (Frazier 2009: 36-37).<sup>21</sup>

Christological Theism begins its analysis of the theological significance of history at the mid-point of history with the Incarnation of Christ. It narrows the significance of history to the Christ-event. Coppedge writes, “In the economic Trinity the Son is primary; that is, he is the person through whom we know the most about the other two” (Coppedge 2007: 128). While the Christ-event is the apex of history and the interpretive lens for all of history, it does not mean that all pre-Incarnation history is without meaning or salvific import; history, in Wesleyan theology, is infused with deep meaning. The history prior to the Incarnation reveals the Creator/Father. In the Christocentric paradigm, salvation history is seemingly narrowed to the New Testament era with little appreciation for the Old Testament era. God had chosen to reveal himself to humanity in the manner he has done, and the piecemeal manner (Heb. 1:1) in which he has done so is instructive. The scope of salvation and the Gospel is seemingly narrowed to the redemption of the post-resurrection disciples. Were not the Jews God’s people? Was not Abraham the father of faith? Wesley and Fletcher argued that the love of God was not confined and that the atonement was universal in its intent. Furthermore, Fletcher argued for a “general gospel” – a gospel which was/is provisionally applicable to all persons regardless of the geographic limits of the community of faith “that heralds the news of God’s redemption” and the historical limitations of “those who lived and died prior to the advent of Christ” (Frazier 2015: 107).<sup>22</sup>

In theologies emphasizing the austerity of God, theologians seem to have no qualms with the doctrine of particular predestination. In contrast, the impetus for Wesleyan theology is the love of God. The early Methodists responded to the hyper-Calvinists, reasserting the love of God against the Calvinist doctrine of particular predestination, and in doing so, Fletcher developed his theology of the union of grace and nature.<sup>23</sup> And concomitant with this union was the idea that the love of God extended beyond the geographic and historical boundaries of the Gospel in Christ. God’s love is not confined to the history after God’s revelation in Christ or to the current geographic confines of the Church. God’s love is not confined!

Yet, Christocentric theists appear to confine the knowledge of God (with its salvific import) to the Christ-event. They limit the noetic, human apprehension of the divine Trinity to the period of the historical Jesus (and the period after it). The myopic, singular focus on the Christ-event, the

beginning point of the theologies, and the neglect of saving activity in the pre-Incarnate history makes one wonder if such Christological Theists deny revelation and salvation to pre-Incarnate humans.

#### *Concerns over the Sources*

Previously, it was observed that there seems to be little or no correspondence between the FAS project and Noble's work. Noble does not list Kinlaw's *Let's Start with Jesus* (2005) or Allan Coppedge's *The God Who is Triune* (2007) in his bibliography of *Christian Theology: Volume One, The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (2022). Nor do the writers of the first two volumes of the *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (2024) refer to Noble's work. Christocentric and Trinitarian Theism seems to arise from sources that are detached from the central commitments of Wesleyan theology. For example, Dr. Ury quotes from Karl Barth, who seems to be the impetus for the methodological shift to "Christocentric Methodology" (Ury 2024: 42).<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Henry Spaulding II laments in his review essay that Wesleyan themes are not as prominent as they might be in Noble's *Christian Theology* (Spaulding 2024: 113).<sup>25</sup>

#### *The Approach to Ministry*

Not only does this Christocentric methodology imply something about the divine-to-human pedagogy, but it also means something about human-to-human pedagogy and a practical approach to ministry. Theological discourse, whether written or oral, is construed to teach the recipients. The structure and order of the Christocentric approach appear to overlook the knowledge of the recipients. As God has accommodated himself to humanity, human beings must accommodate their ministry to the recipients to gain a hearing. The apparent dismissal of both divine and human accommodation to human finitude seems to engender an obtrusive approach to missiology and mission practice.

The early Methodist emphasis on the noetic, chronological order of revelation is significant for missionary practice. When missionaries enter the second culture, they should give due regard to the understanding of the people and the steps in the progress of biblical revelation to effectively lead people to an adequate knowledge of God. Missionaries entering new geographical areas, tribes, or cultures must give due consideration to the understanding, limitations, and culture of the intended audience. They will also allocate adequate time to study and learn the culture to communicate

effectively. They will seek for redemptive analogies, those elements of the culture, which anticipate the Gospel, in order to communicate the Gospel more effectively (Gailey 2007: 226).<sup>26</sup>

Noble asserts that his theology will be more appropriate and palatable for churches in Africa and other regions of the globe (Noble 2022: 79), but the opposite seems to be the case. For example, traditional Africans, as a whole, believe in a divine transcendent God. Kenyan philosopher and author, John Mbiti, states, ‘All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the center of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs’ (Mbiti 1975: 40). Yet, the Christocentric approach does not appear to welcome African faith in God as a starting point of theology or missional practice. Furthermore, Christocentric theism seems to exclude from conversation the commonality of monotheism in discussions with those from other monotheistic world religions.

Noble claims that “the starting point for all Christian theology is not the cultural context, but the Gospel” (Noble 2022: 79). However, most missiologists assert that the best approach to ministry in new contexts is to begin where the people are, typically with the knowledge of the Creator. For several years, New Tribes Missions has stressed the chronological approach of teaching the Bible, which is consistent with this emphasis on the noetic, chronological order of revelation (Steffan 2008: 355).<sup>27</sup> Rather than employing a chronological approach of the Bible in teaching and evangelizing, the Christocentric approach seems to impose the missionary’s ideas upon recipients rather than beginning with their current knowledge and leading them to the apex of God’s revelation in Christ.

## Conclusion

The two projects discussed in this paper make some significant contributions to Wesleyan theology. Readers of these volumes will benefit significantly from a solid, biblical, and historical study of Christology grounded in the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition.

However, I have some concerns about the implications of Christocentric Theism for theology and the practice of ministry. First, Christocentric Theism risks collapsing the fullness of the Trinity into a narrow Christonomism, neglecting the persons of the Father and the Spirit. Secondly, the tendency to emphasize the role of Christ as the mediator of divine truth will tend to underemphasize the roles and persons of the Father and the Spirit as revealers of truth and marginalize the witness of creation,

natural law, and human reason. Thirdly, a singular focus on the Christ of history diminishes the role of the Eternal Son of God and the efficacy of his atoning work for “all human beings in all ages of history and in all places of the world” (Frazier 2015: 104). Fourthly, Christocentric Theism tends, in some expressions, to demonstrate cultural insularity.

Despite the concerns, it must be acknowledged that the two projects understudy in this paper are currently incomplete. The remaining volumes of Noble’s work are highly anticipated, as are the remaining volumes in the *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*. It will be interesting to see how subsequent volumes of these publications address the concerns that have been raised in this review essay.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> It might be said that all orthodox Christians are “Trinitarian theists” in that they hold to the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the Trinitarian theism, addressed in this essay, stresses the noetic, human apprehension of the divine Trinity through divine revelation principally or solely in the historical Jesus. Thus, this essay addresses Trinitarian theism in the latter narrower sense.

<sup>2</sup> Later, Noble acknowledges the traditional approach of several contributions and states of them, “Such a procedure cannot therefore be regarded as wrong” (Noble 2022: 1019).

<sup>3</sup> In this quotation, Noble underscores a broader use of “Trinitarian theism” than I am using in this essay. See footnote number one.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, there seems to be little or no correspondence between the FAS project and Noble’s work. Noble does not list Kinlaw’s *Let’s Start with Jesus* or Allan Coppedge’s *The God Who is Triune* in his bibliography of *Christian Theology*. Nor do the writers of the first two volumes of the *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* make reference to Noble’s work.

<sup>5</sup> Ury 2024: 41. In another place, he writes, “Triune reality revealed in the person of the Son is the center of theology” (Ury 2024: 83).

<sup>6</sup> The connection between the personhood of Christ and human personhood seems to be a distinct feature of the FAS project that does not yet seem to be evident in Noble’s *Christian Theology*. However, Noble does set out a trinitarian theology of holiness in *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting*, Cascade Books: Eugene, Oregon, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See my review of the book: Frazier, J. Russell. “Review of Coppedge, A., *Trinitarian Theology*, Volume Two, in J. N. Oswalt, C. Albertson, and M. Ayars (Eds.), *Holy Love: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*.

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<sup>8</sup> Most of my citations and references will be drawn from *The God Who Is Triune*. I will refer to them as one work, except when there is a need to make reference to each separately.

<sup>9</sup> Italics added.

<sup>10</sup> See an example, from a Wesleyan perspective, in Jerome Van Kuiken, *The Creed We Need: Nicene Faith for Wesleyan Witness* (Aldersgate Press, 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Coppedge states, "Once we have the whole perspective, we shift from the order of knowing to what may be called the 'order of being'" (Coppedge 2007: 54).

<sup>12</sup> *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Heb 1:1. Hereafter, all scripture references will employ this version of the Bible with an in-text citation, indicating this version as NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> Dowey discussed the two aspects of the doctrine of accommodation, the accommodation to finite comprehension and accommodation of human sinfulness (Dowey 1994: 3ff.).

<sup>14</sup> T. A. Noble, "The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Responding to Four Positive Critics," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 200–201.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Wangerin, *The Orphean Passages: The Drama of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 23. Wangerin's ideas appear to align closely with developmental psychology and the related field of faith development.

<sup>16</sup> Here, the *ordo salutis* reflects the *ordo temporum*. See the discussion below.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Bounds criticizes Noble's Christocentric Theism because "it does not follow the biblical narrative given to the church or the history of God's 'special' revelation to humanity" (Christopher T. Bounds, "A Theological Appraisal of T.A. Noble's Christian Theology, Volume 1, The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 190).

<sup>18</sup> Noble acknowledges that the structural unfolding of the traditional approach of the creeds and of the written theologies is different than the Christological approach that he has taken in his work (cf. Noble 2022: 1018f.).

<sup>19</sup> The citation above from the Catechism of *The Book of Common Prayer* reflects this very idea.

<sup>20</sup> There is no correspondence between Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations and the dispensations popularized by Cyrus I. Scofield.

<sup>21</sup> Frazier, 2009: 36-37. Fletcher gave a more thoroughgoing response to the Minute controversy of the 1770's and developed a more thoroughgoing theology of history than did Wesley. Cf. J. Russell Frazier, *True Christianity: The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Frazier 2015: 107. On 29 August 2025, I presented this essay as a paper in a colloquium in the School of Religion and Christian Ministry at Africa Nazarene University. An African academic raised the following question during the question-and-answer session, "Does Wesleyan theology provide hope for seeing my grandfather who died without hearing the name of Christ?" Thankfully, it does. For more information on Fletcher's position on this subject, see chapter 4 on "The Dispensation of the Father" in Frazier 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See chapter 2, "God of Nature and of Grace: Theological Foundations for the Doctrine of Dispensations," in Frazier 2015: 107.

<sup>24</sup> Ury 2024: 42. Ury quotes the following from Karl Barth: "Christology is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology."

<sup>25</sup> Spaulding 2024: 113. See Dr. Maddox's comments which present a more nuanced view (Maddox, Randy. "Reflections on T.A. Noble's Christian Theology, Volume 1, The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 161-67).

<sup>26</sup> Gailey 2007: 22. See for example Don Richardson's contribution in Winter, Ralph D., and Steven C. Hawthorne. "Redemptive Analogy." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Don Richardson. 397-403. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Steffen 2008: 355. The concept is dramatically presented in the video: *Ee-Taow: The Mouk Story* and *The Next Chapter*.

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