

Macarius, St Gregory of Nyssa, and the Wesleys

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One can find similarities and dissimilarities between almost any two things. Compare a dog and an elephant: they are dissimilar or similar depending on whether one considers their size or number of limbs. Just so when comparing writers' ideas: points of contact and divergence may invariably be found depending on what one makes up one's mind to look for. This makes 'source-research' an inexact science unduly reliant on what is in the eye of the beholder. Because scholarly imagination can conjure up connections between any thinker and someone s/he once read it is doubly important accurately to describe evidence of a source where its existence can be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion of the influence on John and Charles Wesley of St Gregory of Nyssa and the patristic writer known as Macarius, in particular with regard to their teaching on Christian perfection, a doctrine for which the Wesleys used a variety of terms including perfect love, perfect holiness and entire sanctification.

It has long been recognized that the Wesleys were influenced by the Eastern Christian tradition at significant points in their theology and spirituality.¹ Some of this influence was indirect, mediated, for example, through the Cambridge Platonists and the Caroline divines.² Yet a good deal arose from conscious and direct borrowings from the Eastern Fathers that began even before the Wesleys arrived in Oxford. When he began issuing his *Christian Library* in 1749, John Wesley published as his first volume a substantial portion of the *Spiritual Homilies* from a translation made in 1721³ which had been in his father's library, prefacing them with the remark that '*such a victorious faith as overcomes the world, and working by love, is ever fulfilling the whole law of God*'.⁴ Certainly from their days in the Holy Club the Wesleys were diligent students of ancient Christian literature.

Prominent among modern commentators who have given due attention to Eastern influences on the Wesleys was Albert Outler. In his introduction to *John Wesley's Sermons*⁵ Outler developed a suggestion

* The authors are indebted to Randy L. Maddox for encouragement and advice with this paper.

concerning the influence on early Methodist theology of the Eastern Fathers and argued that Wesley believed not only that Christian antiquity encapsulated the essence of the Christian tradition, but that 'it had developed in a more stable fashion within the Greek Orthodoxy than in the Latin West'. Outler's view has been adopted by several influential modern interpreters of Wesley⁶ and continues to shape Methodism's assumptions about its closeness to Eastern theology whenever Methodist/Orthodox relations are discussed. Yet since Outler first sketched his view of the relation between the Wesleys, St Gregory and Macarius, doubts have been growing about one significant detail in Outler's thesis.⁷ Outler rested his view of Wesley's Macarian text on Werner Jaeger's contention, in *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius*, that Macarius was not a significantly original thinker, but was dependent on the thought of the earlier theologian, St Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395 CE). Thus Outler reports that:

Werner Jaeger has reviewed the recent studies of the historical and literary problems involved and has exhibited the evidence which demonstrates that the author of the so-called Macarian Homilies [...] was not a fourth-century Egyptian 'desert father' but rather a fifth-century *Syrian* monk, whose conception of Christian spirituality was derived almost exclusively from Gregory [of Nyssa].⁸

John Wesley, Outler intends to assert, was not influenced by Macarius – whom Outler takes to be the less original and less important theologian – but by Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers who, with his brother Basil the Great and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, did much collectively to shape the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Wesley, that is to say, drank from the mainstream of the Christian tradition and not from one of its less significant tributaries. In one sense, as we shall see, Outler is right: there is indeed a close relationship between Gregory of Nyssa and the writer of the Macarian homilies. But in an important point of detail Jaeger – and following him Outler – was in all probability mistaken: Macarius did not follow Gregory; Gregory followed Macarius.

There are certainly connections to be made between Macarius and the Cappadocian Fathers – but not along the lines envisaged by Outler. As one of the authors of this piece has argued elsewhere, Macarius is a rough contemporary, not a later theological follower, of the Cappadocians.⁹ He wrote not in the fifth but rather in the late fourth century. He was indeed in close contact with the Syriac Christian

tradition but also very much an inhabitant of the linguistic and conceptual thought-world of the Greek Fathers. This, along with certain other indicators, places him most plausibly in northern Mesopotamia or in the wider region of Antioch: in other words, at no very great distance from Cappadocia. While no personal acquaintance can be assumed, notwithstanding the young Basil's journeying in these areas, Macarius shares much with Basil's approach to monastic reform. Both are sympathetic to, but not uncritical of, the radical ascetic tendencies of their time. Both have similar strategies and solutions for ensuring unity within the ascetic community. Significantly, both use the designation 'Christians' in preference to that of 'monks'.¹⁰ This usage emphasizes the fact that with both Basil and Macarius we are dealing with an ascetic context anterior to the general ascendancy of specifically Egyptian forms of monasticism – one in which ascetic communities remained closely integrated into society and into the ecclesial community at large.

A number of theological similarities between Macarius and the Cappadocian Fathers can also be noted: the conception and polemical use of apophatic theology and the defence of the divinity of the Holy Spirit – both crucial issues in the context of the trinitarian debates of the fourth century. The most tangible connection, however, lies in the undeniable relationship between Macarius' *Epistola magna* and Gregory's *De instituto christiano*; one of these texts is certainly dependent upon the other. The great Werner Jaeger, on whom Outler relies, produced in 1954 an edition of both pieces, affirming the priority of the *De instituto christiano*. His thesis was initially widely accepted. The Benedictine scholar and monastic historian Jean Gribomont, however, sounded an early voice of dissent, pointing out that the various correspondences could equally well support Macarian priority. This line of enquiry was followed up by Reinhart Staats in his *Gregor von Nyssa und die Messalianer* and in his own parallel edition of the texts. Staats' arguments have effectively overturned the thesis of Jaeger as to the priority of the Gregorian text. Mariette Canévet's suggestion that the *De instituto christiano* itself may not be authentic has not met with any great success.¹¹

The *Epistola magna* is Macarius' fullest statement of his vision of authentic asceticism, which is to say authentic Christianity.¹² It is a call for an asceticism based on inward experience and not on showy ascetic feats, a call for the renewal of the charismatic gifts of the primitive Church produced in the era of Christian Empire, an era in which Christian zeal was widely perceived to be on the wane. Macarius presents the goal of the ascetic life as the expulsion of the passions, the

revelation of baptismal grace and the perfect acquisition of the Spirit. Through the synergy of divine grace and human effort we are to attain to 'the purification and sanctification of the heart that comes about by the participation of the perfect and divine Spirit, accomplished in all perception and plenitude' (EM 3.1-2). All this, says Macarius, is nothing more than a call to realize the promises contained in Scripture. Perfect purity is possible, contrary to what gainsayers might claim.

The *De instituto christiano* parallels all this very closely, albeit in a rather more polished and sophisticated language and style. Although we cannot here enter into all the details of the question (questions of style and language, comparison with other works by the respective authors, use of idiomatic scriptural citations, and other factors), it can safely be stated that the more refined text of Gregory is indeed based on that of Macarius. Gregory was evidently impressed (as would be Wesley) by Macarius' ascetic teaching, most notably in respect of the imperative of perfection: purification from the passions and the acquisition of the Spirit. His re working is, of course, the sincerest form of flattery.

What difference does it make to students and followers of the Wesleys if Macarius borrowed from Gregory of Nyssa or Gregory from Macarius? Either way the Wesleys are drawing on an Eastern source and thereby opening a door to dialogue between Orthodox and Methodist theology.¹³ Attending to the nuances in Macarius' writings and those of Gregory of Nyssa might lead one to pick up different resonances in the Wesleys' writings; but the differences are not usually great and the reasoning involved in discerning the Wesleys' dependence on either Gregory or Macarius often so speculative that the results would not be likely to prove immensely fruitful. Yet setting the record straight about the priority of Macarius in this instance does offer a fresh opportunity to reflect upon a key feature in the doctrine of Christian perfection on which Macarius, Gregory, and the Wesleys lay emphasis: the theme of *epektasis*, that constant and eternal 'straining forward' (cf. Philippians 3.13) of the finite creature towards the infinite God. Perfection, in this view, is never static but always dynamic. As the cry taken up in C.S. Lewis' *Last Battle* puts it, we must always go 'Farther up and farther in'.¹⁴

The theme of *epektasis* receives its classic expression in Gregory's masterpiece, the *Life of Moses*:

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus no limit can

interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found, nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied.¹⁵

Macarius, too, was fascinated by Moses as an archetype of the spiritual life. He takes Moses as a sign of the dynamic process of perfection that begins even now, in this life, illustrating this with a famous passage in Paul much beloved of Gregory and also, of course, of the Wesleys:

The blessed Moses showed in a type, through the glory of the Spirit which was upon his face and which no-one was able to behold, how at the resurrection of the righteous the bodies of the worthy will be glorified with the glory that holy and faithful souls are even now granted to possess in the inner self. For, as [St Paul] says, 'with unveiled face', that is to say in the inner self, 'we reflect as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, and we are transfigured into the same image from glory to glory'. (II 5.10)

This process of transformation and journey of perfection begins in this life and goes on in the next. Macarius speaks vividly of the 'unquenchable spiritual desire' wakened in those who taste even fleetingly of the grace of God:

Just as the sea is not filled even though all the rivers of the world pour into it, so the soul which is found worthy to enter into the peace of the godhead of the Spirit is never sated howsoever many graces of spiritual gifts are given her. The more she receives, the more she seeks, the more she is sated, the more she desires, and the more she is filled, the more she lacks. (I 21.12)

Such was just one of the aspects of Gregory and Macarius' teaching that so impressed the Wesleys. But the doctrine of Christian perfection is, as the Wesleys knew full well, also susceptible to misunderstanding and abuse. The doctrine was capable of becoming, as a piece of Charles Wesley doggerel on Philippians 3.12 makes clear, a literal pretext for a 'holier-than-thou' Christianity:

'Then know thy place', (a novice cries,
Whose fancy has attained the prize,)
'Stand by thyself, nor rank with me,
For I am holier than thee;
Beyond the chief apostle I!
And you, who dare my grace deny,
The proof of my perfection know,
It is – because I *think* it so!'¹⁶

John Wesley, too, knew the doctrine of Christian perfection to be troubling to many. In his sermon 'The Scripture Way of Salvation' he expressly cites Macarius against such hasty declarations of one's own perfection.¹⁷ He also begins his sermon on Philippians 3.12¹⁸ with the assertion that 'There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this [viz., 'perfect']'. The sermon declares Wesley's intention to hold fast to the term because of its scriptural provenance, and proceeds to explain four senses in which the Christian *may not* be perfect: the Christian may never be free from ignorance, error, infirmity or temptation. In the second part of the sermon Wesley describes the senses in which the Christian *may* be properly described as 'perfect'. Beginning with the conviction that something decisive has taken place in those who are born of God (cf. 1 Peter 4.1-2) Wesley struggles to make sense of the observable growth from immaturity to maturity in faith. Salvation is accomplished in those born to faith and the Spirit poured out on them; yet the sermon concludes by citing Philippians 3.13-14 with its sense that there is more to come.

While John does not display in this particular sermon any obvious debt to the writings of Macarius, which we have seen he knew well, it is significant that appended to the published version are stanzas by Charles Wesley on 'The promise of sanctification' in which there is a possible echo of Macarius and a clear and striking intimation of the final stanza of his incomparably finer hymn, published in 1747, 'Love divine, all loves excelling' in which a parallel is clear:

Open my faith's interior eye,
Display thy glory from above;
And all I am shall sink and die,
Lost in astonishment and love.¹⁹

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

*Hymns & Psalms 267*²⁰

The earlier of the two hymns may well *imply* Paul's doctrine of straining forward to perfection taken up in Macarius and Gregory Nyssa; but it is

'Love divine' that captures its sense most vividly. Perfection is not a static state in which, once achieved, one remains; but a journey through ever more beautiful landscape in which Christians move daily 'from glory to glory / Till in heaven we take our place'.

By 1764 (according to his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*²¹) John Wesley too had found his way to a clear articulation of *epektasis* in theses summing up his view of Christian perfection. Present in the theses, to be sure, are several ideas adumbrated in his sermon on 'Christian perfection'; but here the idea of growth in perfection has been stropped to razor sharpness in the statement (number 8) that Christian perfection: 'is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.'

The doctrine has been sharpened to this point in Wesley in consequence of the abrasive nature of decades of controversy undertaken through polemical letters and pamphlets; and perhaps for this reason the form John Wesley's summation takes is coolly forensic when set alongside the ascetic and mystical form the doctrine takes in Macarius and Gregory. But its content is identical. And in 'Love divine' we have, whether the debt is direct or indirect, an authentic representation in contemporary Methodism of an ancient and beautiful scriptural teaching, given prominence in the Eastern Fathers that might otherwise have been neglected in the theology of the West. It also serves as a salutary reminder to all those engaged in ecumenical endeavour – such as students and staff of the Cambridge Theological Federation in which we work – to go: 'Farther up and farther in!'

NOTES

1. For a splendid overview of John Wesley's reception of Eastern theological influences see Randy L. Maddox, 'John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: influences, convergencies and differences' in *Ashbury Theological Journal* 45.2 (1990) pp. 29-53. See also Frances Young, 'Inner struggle: Some Parallels between the Spirituality of John Wesley and the Greek Fathers', pp. 157-172 in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, ed., S.T. Kimbrough Jr., SUS Press, New York, 2002.
2. See, e.g. David Bundy, 'Christian Virtue: John Wesley and the Alexandrine Tradition' in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 26, 1991.
3. *Primitive Morality or the Spiritual Homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian; Full of very profitable instructions concerning that Perfection which Expected from Christians and which it is their Duty to Endeavour after. Done out of Greek with several considerable emendations and some enlargements from a Bodleian MS, never before printed*, T. Haywood (tr.), (London 1721).
4. Cf., *A Christian Library consisting of extracts from and abridgements of the choicest pieces of practical divinity, which have been published in the English*

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- tongue, ed. John Wesley, Volume 7, p. 83. See also Wesley's *Diary* for 30 and 31 July 1736, which records that Wesley read Macarius avidly during a troublesome sea voyage.
5. Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley's Sermons: an Introduction* (Abingdon Press 1991) reprinted from *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 1* (Abingdon 1984), pp. 82-4. See also Albert C. Outler, ed., 'John Wesley' in *A Library of Christian Thought* (Oxford 1964), p. 9 n. 26.
 6. See for example, Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (Epworth 1989), p. 102 (though Rack doubts whether too much should be made of resemblances between Macarius and Wesley); and *passim*, Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, (Kingswood/Abingdon 1994).
 7. Thus, Maddox (1990), art.cit., p. 31.
 8. Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 9 n. 26.
 9. Virtually all the arguments presented in this section of the article are rehearsed at greater length and with all due supporting material and further references in Marcus Plested, *The Macarian Legacy* (Oxford 2004). Citations from Macarius refer to critical editions as follows. I = H. Berthold, *Makarios/Symeon, Reden und Briefe. Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)* (2 vols.) (GCS 55-56; Berlin 1973). II = H. Dörries, E. Klostermann, and M. Kroeger, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien des Makarios* (PTS 4; Berlin 1964). EM = R. Staats, *Makarios-Symeon: Epistola Magna. Eine messalianische Mönchsregel und ihre Umschrift in Gregors von Nyssa "De Instituto Christiano"* (Göttingen 1984).
 10. Basil, *Longer Rules* 17.2 (PG 31 964C); 20.1-2 (972C-973A). Macarius I 21.2, 48.3.11.
 11. The relevant texts are, in the order given above: Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden 1954); Gribomont, 'Le De instituto christiano et le Messalianisme de Grégoire de Nysse' in *Studia Patristica* 5 (Berlin 1962), 312-22; Staats, *Gregor von Nyssa und die Messalianer: Die Frage der Priorität zweiter altkirchlicher Schriften* (PTS 8; Berlin 1968) and *Makarios-Symeon: Epistola Magna* (see n. vi above); Canévet, 'Le "De instituto christiano" est-il de Grégoire de Nysse?' in *Revue des études grecques* 82 (1969), 404-23.
 12. The *Great Letter* edited by Jaeger, and subsequently by Staats, must be distinguished from the gravely corrupted version edited by Floss and contained in Migne (PG 34 420C-441A).
 13. A point well made by Frances Young (2002), art.cit., p. 160.
 14. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 146 ff.
 15. Gregory of Nyssa, tr. Malherbe and Fergusson, *The Life of Moses*, (New York 1978), p. 239.
 16. G. Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, Volume XIII (London 1872) p. 79.
 17. Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 2 Sermons II 34-70* (Abingdon 1985), p. 159. The sermon was published in 1765. The quotation is from Homily IX of the Macarian Homilies, and the quotation in the sermon uses the same translation as that used in Wesley's first volume of the *Christian Library*. In a footnote, Outler repeats his assertion, citing Jaeger as his authority, that Macarius, described as a fourth-century Egyptian, was 'probably not the author of the homilies and other pieces attributed to him'.

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18. Albert C. Outler ed., *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 2 Sermons II 34-70* (Abingdon 1985), p. 99. Outler acknowledges confusion about the precise date the sermon was delivered, though 1741 is normally given.
19. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, stanza 25, p. 124.
20. This verse of 'Love Divine' appears in the 1780 hymnal *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* in this form, but the original 1747 version, according to the *Companion to Hymns & Psalms*, had 'pure and sinless let us be' in the second line.
21. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, first published in 1766, was published in revised editions in 1767 and 1770, achieving a final form in 1777. The citation is from section 26.