

## MILDRED WYNKOOP AND THE POST-FUNDAMENTALIST PROJECT

Stan Ingersol, Archivist and Historian, Church of the Nazarene

Episcopal Bishop William Stevens confirmed Mildred Wynkoop in the Christian faith on July 28, 1935, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Ventura, California. Wynkoop was twenty-nine years old. The Rev. Reginald Hammond, St. Paul's rector, was the most likely shepherd of her confirmation class. She pasted Hammond's photograph inside the front cover of *The Book of Common Prayer* that she had received as a gift nearly two months earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Wynkoop was the product of a Nazarene home and congregation in Seattle, Washington. She was also the product of two Nazarene colleges, a member of theologian H. Orton Wiley's circle, an ordained minister in the Church of the Nazarene, and the spouse of another Nazarene minister. Yet she distinctly felt that she should enter a confirmation class and follow it through to its conclusion, culminating in her confirmation. So how should we assess this event?<sup>2</sup>

To put it simply, she wanted a Christian faith that was uniquely and personally her own. Though raised in the church and shaped indelibly by it, she realized that in matters of Christian faith one can never afford to be a mere pensioner on her ancestors. The faith of parents may well inspire faith in their children, as surely as the faith of a friend or spouse; still, it must be owned personally. So before her thirtieth birthday, at the age when many women reevaluate their lives and make significant life decisions, Mildred Wynkoop pursued the question: what does it mean for me, now that I am a fully formed adult, to be a Christian? She could have pursued this question in several different ways, but she chose the structured setting of a confirmation class—an ancient form of Christian pedagogy that her own denomination did not practice.

### *Mildred's Story Begins*

Mildred Bangs' story begins in the wider story of European immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She was the first native-born American in her family line—the oldest child of two European immigrants.

Her mother, Méry Dupertuis, was born in Canton de Vaux, Switzerland. The Dupertuis family migrated to America in 1889, when Méry was nearly six. They settled in Kansas, moved to Oklahoma Territory, then, when Méry was fifteen, moved again to Washington State, where they settled near Seattle and frequently attended services at the city's Salvation Army center.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* given to Wynkoop on May 25, 1935. Notations on the inside cover gives the date and place of her confirmation. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop Collection, Nazarene Archives, Lenexa, KS. (Folder 2228-1)

<sup>2</sup> James Fowler, author of *Stages of Faith*, suggests that the lives of the faithful follow trajectories, and that earlier events in a believer's life can illuminate the subsequent journey of faith. The event that this writer finds most illuminating for understanding Wynkoop is her confirmation, since it followed a months-long review of her faith journey so far. (See James Fowler, ed., *Trajectories in Faith* (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bangs, translator and commentator, *Swiss Sisters Separated: Pioneer Life in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Washington, 1889-1914, from the Letters of Louise Guillermin Dupertuis to Her Sister Élise Guillermin, the Painter*. (Rockport, Maine: Picton Press, 2003), p. 163. Also see the immigrant diary of Méry Dupertuis Bangs, 1899-1900, which details her family's 1899 trip from Oklahoma to Washington State. Méry Dupertuis Bangs Papers, Nazarene Archives (Folder 1320-5).

Mildred's father was Carl Oliver Bang, a Norwegian, who went to sea with his uncle to avoid military service. After the ship sailed around the tip of South America, with its rough seas, Bang knew that he did not care for a mariner's life. He jumped ship near San Francisco and hid until he was certain the vessel had sailed on. He made his way north to Seattle. In time, he anglicized his name, adding the "s" to it and changing its pronunciation from the Norwegian "Bong" to the American "Bangs." He, too, attended services at Seattle's Salvation Army center, participated in its street meetings, and met the Dupertuis family from Switzerland.<sup>4</sup>

A romance blossomed. Méry Dupertuis and Oliver Bangs married in December 1904 and traveled by steamer down the Pacific coast to Los Angeles for their honeymoon. One of their goals was to visit the Church of the Nazarene. Another was to meet its pastor, Phineas Bresee, who visited Seattle the following year, where he organized a Nazarene class, appointing Oliver Bangs, Rev. H. D. Brown, and Emma Colburn as its officers.<sup>5</sup> In 1907, the class was reorganized into a church, and Rev. Elsie Wallace was called as its pastor.

Bangs was a carpenter, and the couple lived in a five-room cottage that he had built. It was located three miles from downtown Seattle but only a block from the streetcar line that could take them there. Bangs built houses and sold them. With each sale, he bought cows, and eventually the family operated a dairy as well. Oliver and Méry's family expanded as their six children were born. Mildred was the oldest, born in 1905, followed by Bernice, Thelma, Florence, and Olive. Carl Oliver Bangs, Jr., born in 1922, was the youngest.<sup>6</sup>

The Bangs siblings were surrounded by religious influences, their lives deeply rooted in Nazarene soil. One of Mildred's earliest memories was hearing the Nazarene patriarch Phineas Bresee preach at one of the Northwest District's gatherings. She and her siblings were also well acquainted with H. D. Brown, another Nazarene patriarch. Brown was the first Nazarene district superintendent ever appointed, and his district encompassed Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. His home in Seattle was the place where Bresee organized that Nazarene class in 1905. Brown was an aging avuncular presence among Seattle's Nazarenes during the years that Mildred Bangs and her siblings grew up. Decades later, her brother, theologian Carl Bangs, still remembered Brown's milk order that the Bangs dairy left on the old man's doorstep; it included "two quarts of sour milk" weekly.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Details given orally to the writer on different occasions by Carl Bangs, Jr., and Mildred Bangs Wynkoop; along with two unpublished manuscripts titled "Report to 1991 District Assembly" and "Oral Tape Recording for Archives," Wynkoop Collection (Folder 1427-4). Her collection contains two thick files with autobiographical notes and reflections, which include details about her parents.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee: His Life in Methodism, the Holiness Movement, and the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), pp. 249-250. Before her marriage, Emma Stine Colburn had lived in Los Angeles, where she had been a close friend to Phineas and Maria Bresee. After moving to Seattle, Colburn received letters from the Bresees, which she later gave to her pastor, Alpin M. Bowes. His son, Alpin P. Bowes, later donated this correspondence to the Nazarene Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Bangs, *Swiss Sisters Separated*, pp. 229-234. Mrs. Dupertuis described her son-in-law, whom she called "Olivier" in her letters, as "a blond Norwegian; good sort of man, I believe; working well, and above all a good Christian."

<sup>7</sup> Carl Bangs, conversation with the writer.



**Front row: Carl Bangs, Sr., Carl Bangs, Jr., Méry Dupertuis Bangs.  
Back row, far right: Mildred Bangs**

Church, Sunday school, revivals, and district assemblies were all a part of the lives of the Bangs children. So, too, were notions of ministry and service. Bernice entered the ministry around 1933 as an evangelistic worker.<sup>8</sup> Mildred was ordained in 1934 on the Southern California District by general superintendent John Goodwin. Carl was ordained in 1945, also on the Southern California District. The family's deep sense of personal connection to Bresee and other Nazarene founders on the Pacific coast (including H. Orton Wiley, Alpin M. Bowes, and Elsie Wallace) was an important reason why Carl Bangs devoted nearly two decades of research and writing to become Bresee's most recent, reliable, and complete biographer.<sup>9</sup>

Mildred Bangs forged her family's early relationship with Nazarene higher education. She entered Northwest Nazarene College in 1926. Her most important contact there was with H. Orton Wiley, its president. She joined a collegiate quartet, which traveled on weekends promoting the college. Wiley often accompanied them. She later recalled that Wiley was very fine company during those long hours in the car. His relationship with the quartet deepened over the course of those years. When he announced in 1928 that he would leave Nampa and return to California to resume the presidency of Pasadena College, Mildred and two other quartet

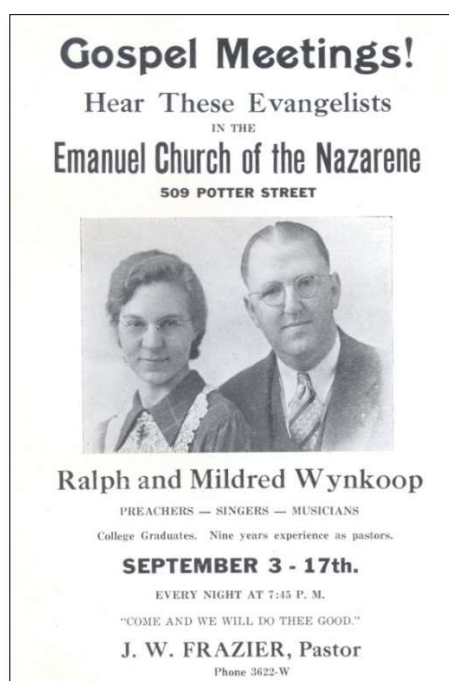
---

<sup>8</sup> Bernice Bangs and her husband, Rev. Alfred Morgan, engaged in home mission work in Alaska. She wrote about this experience in *The Very Thought of Thee: Adventures of an Arctic Missionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Bresee ordained Alpin M. Bowes, an early pastor in San Diego, at the Second General Assembly at Pilot Point, Texas, in 1908. Bowes was later a pastor in Seattle, where his son, Alpin P. Bowes, was a childhood friend of Carl Bangs. They reunited in Kansas City many years later. Wiley was an early pastor in the San Francisco area and later graciously invited Mildred and Carl into the life of theological scholarship.

members followed him to Pasadena. In turn, her siblings followed her to Pasadena for their own college work.

H. Orton Wiley drew Mildred Bangs into the theological life. One wonders: would she have viewed herself as a potential theologian without that personal bond with Wiley? But the personal bond *was* there. Years later, she reminisced about visiting President and Mrs. Wiley in their home, and getting to know their sons, Lester and Ward, who became Episcopal priests. She took Wiley's theology courses and assisted him in the office by duplicating his class handouts—typescript pages that were early versions of his three-volume *Christian Theology*. Years later, she looked back and stated that “in a sense I am a Wileyite,” and then drew this distinction: Wiley was a model, not a guru. He was “a goad to fresh, released in-depth Biblical dependence that nourished a searching mind.”<sup>10</sup>



She joined Pasadena College's collegiate quartet and met Ralph Wynkoop, another of its members. They married in 1928. Their studies continued, and she graduated twice from Pasadena College—in 1931 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and in 1933 with a Bachelor of Theology degree. General superintendent John Goodwin ordained her in 1934.<sup>11</sup> Ralph was ordained the following year. They served churches as co-pastors and traveled as evangelists over the next fifteen years.

Wynkoop began feeling “burned out” by the late 1940s. She decided to attend a theological seminary, and she and Ralph settled in Portland, Oregon, where she earned the

<sup>10</sup> Note dated February 13, 1991. Tucked into her dog-eared and well-marked volume of Wiley's *Christian Theology*; and, “Of Dr. H. Orton Wiley,” MS, 2 pp., Wynkoop, Collection (Folder 1427-4). Wynkoop talked about Wiley's sons in oral history interviews she gave in 1991 and 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Assembly of the Southern California District, Church of the Nazarene* (1934): 27, 66.

Bachelor of Divinity degree from Western Evangelical Seminary in 1952. From there they moved to the Chicago area, and three years later Northern Baptist Theological Seminary awarded her the Doctor of Theology degree.

### *Theological Agendas*

The mature Wynkoop referred to H. Orton Wiley as a model, but he appears to have been more than that initially, for she inherited Wiley's theological agenda when she first entered the field of theology. Wiley was recognized as the leading exponent of Arminian theology within American evangelical Protestantism and was so identified by Carl F. H. Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today* and the leading evangelical theologian of his generation.<sup>12</sup> Wiley's theological agenda, in turn, was also inherited, and it was deeply rooted in the early history of British and American Methodism.

Wesleyan theology's long contest with Calvinism extended back to the 18th century, to the disputes that John and Charles Wesley had with George Whitefield and others in the circle of Selena, Countess of Huntingdon. Further, when Wesleyan Methodism entered North America, it entered a religious environment dominated by Reformed theology. The contest between Arminians and Calvinists shaped Methodist theology for generations, and theological battles were fought not only through literature but in spirited public debates over such issues as grace, election, and baptism. These debates occurred in big eastern cities along the Atlantic coast but also on the frontier and in small towns, often involving ordinary pastors. With the rise of Boston Personalism, a new wing of Methodist theology emerged that simply ignored the debate with Calvinism and shifted its attention elsewhere. Still, others continued to carry on the apologetic and polemic style of earlier Methodist theology.

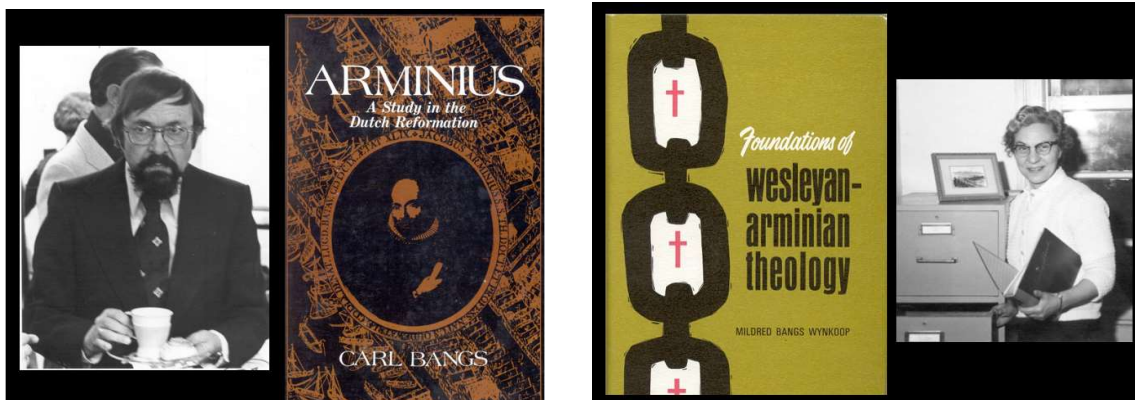
Wiley is an interesting case. He was steeped in Personalism but maintained a strong interest in promoting Arminianism, which is reflected in his many writings—not only in his books, but also his regular column on theology in *The Preacher's Magazine*. This is also evident in the early work of two of his students, Mildred Wynkoop and Carl Bangs. Carl made the study of James Arminius the focus of the first half of his scholarly career. His revised doctoral dissertation (University of Chicago) was published as *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (1971). It brought him recognition as his generation's leading American scholar of Arminius and early Dutch Arminianism, and it probably propelled him to the presidency of the American Society of Church History. But Carl developed other theological interests that were quite different from Wiley's. At Chicago, he studied under Bernard Meland and others who shaped his interest in process thought. He remained grounded in classical Protestantism, but enriched by the Chicago influence, and he took satisfaction in being the first person to teach a course in American process theology at a major Dutch university.

Wynkoop's early work also showed Wiley's unmistakable imprint and influence. This was most notable in her *Foundations of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology* (1967). In the classroom, she was a firm critic of Calvinism throughout her life, conscious and disapproving of its inroads into the thinking of ordinary Nazarene pastors and laity.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Carl Henry's introduction to "The Debate Over Divine Election," *Christianity Today*, vol. 4, no.1 (Oct. 12, 1959).

But there was a marked change in her theological agenda with the publication of *A Theology of Love* (1972). This book differed from the spirit of earlier holiness theology by its near-absence of concern for the long struggle against the Calvinists. She had developed her own theological agenda.



### *Evangelicalism's Post-Fundamentalist Project*

Wynkoop's theological interests were shaped by her times. Her career in theology developed after World War II, a critical juncture in American evangelicalism. Fundamentalism had influenced America's evangelical churches and had launched several new denominations. Nazarenes were deeply tinged by it. The critical question that fundamentalism posed to Nazarenes was this: to what extent would the fundamentalist movement—which had a different agenda than the holiness movement that had birthed the Nazarenes—influence their self-understanding and draw their energies away into the service of goals that had originated in the minds of those outside the Wesleyan-holiness movement?<sup>13</sup>

The post-fundamentalist project began with Reformed theologians led by Carl F. H. Henry and his circle. They founded Fuller Theological Seminary as a post-fundamentalist institution, and they started the magazine *Christianity Today* for the same purpose. Edward J. Carnell, one of Henry's colleagues, summarized the distinction between fundamentalists and post-fundamentalist evangelicals. He argued that fundamentalism claims to represent orthodox Christianity but actually enshrines a cultish view of it. He described the primary traits of fundamentalism's cultic orthodoxy as "mores and symbols of its own devising," detachment from "the church universal," and belligerence. By contrast, those representing classical Protestant Orthodoxy are "impatient with the small talk of the cult; they long for authentic conversation on historic themes."<sup>14</sup>

In her classroom, Wynkoop made it clear that she admired Carl Henry's intellect and that she resonated with the effort to bring evangelical Protestantism back from fundamentalism's

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 12: "Shaping the Nazarene Mind" in Floyd Cunningham, et. al., *Our Watchword & Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Edward John Carnell, "Orthodoxy: Cultic vs. Classical," *The Christian Century* (March 30, 1960): 377. The development of post-World War Evangelicalism as a "post-Fundamentalist" project is well documented by George Marsden in *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (1987), and in Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (2016).

reactionary posture. She was by no means unique among Nazarenes in this attitude. Her fellow travelers were many, including Wiley, W. T. Purkiser, J. Glenn Gould, William Greathouse, Timothy Smith, Kenneth Grider, Rob Staples, Paul Bassett, John Allan Knight, H. Ray Dunning, A. F. Harper, and Free Methodists Leslie Marston and Mary Alice Tenney, among others. Since fundamentalism had made such deep inroads into Wesleyan churches, the effort to delineate between it and classical Protestant orthodoxy was an ongoing task in Wesleyan classrooms.

The post-fundamentalist project was partly a movement that crossed denominational lines. Its story played out in the subsequent history of the magazine *Christianity Today* and the National Association of Evangelicals. George Marsden tells its well in *Reforming Fundamentalism* (1987), which details the founding and early years of Fuller Theological Seminary, a lens through which Marsden examines post-war evangelicalism more generally.

Each evangelical denomination also had to work its way out of fundamentalism on its own terms, and by means of its own unique strategy. Wiley laid some of the groundwork for Nazarene post-fundamentalism by shaping the denomination's article of faith on Scripture at the 1928 General Assembly. Using deliberate language, Wiley wrote the article so that it affirmed the Anglican and Methodist emphasis on the sufficiency of Holy Scripture as a reliable guide to salvation.<sup>15</sup> Wynkoop reflected Wiley's interest when she made the doctrine of Scripture the subject of her doctoral dissertation in 1955.<sup>16</sup>

The generation that launched the post-fundamentalist project was followed by another generation of evangelicals who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Richard Quebedeaux dubbed the new generation "The Young Evangelicals." The Young Evangelicals were no monolithic lot. Some were long-haired Jesus freaks who pioneered new ways of witnessing and new styles of Christian music. Others were influenced by the social struggles over civil rights for Blacks and the movement to end the Vietnam War. They launched new magazines like *The Other Side* and *The Post-American* (later renamed *Sojourners*), while evangelical feminists launched the magazine *Daughters of Sarah*.<sup>17</sup>

Wynkoop identified with several strains of Young Evangelical thought. She was interested intensely in the renewal of Christian social ministries and ministry across racial lines, and she was interested in the new evangelical feminism. She believed that her own thinking aligned with the young evangelicals in significant ways. Her book, *John Wesley: Christian Revolutionary*, based on a series of chapel lectures, assessed the significance of the Wesleyan tradition's founder as a model for evangelical renewal in an age of social activism.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion is entitled "Of the Sufficiency of the Scriptures." Article V in the Methodist Episcopal Church's Twenty-Five Articles of Religion is entitled "Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation."

<sup>16</sup> Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, "A Historical and Semantic Analysis of Methods of Biblical Interpretation as They Relate to Views of Inspiration." Unpublished Th.D. dissertation (Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955). A copy is in the Wynkoop Collection and another copy is in the library at Nazarene Theological Seminary.

<sup>17</sup> See Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy* (1974). The "young evangelicals" in this period were represented by Ron Sider, Donald Dayton, Letha Scanzoni, Nancy Hardesty, Jim Wallis, and John Alexander, among others.

<sup>18</sup> Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *John Wesley: Christian Revolutionary* (1970).

Tom Nees was one of those “young evangelicals” of the 1970s who has acknowledged a debt to Wynkoop. Nees was the pastor of First Church of the Nazarene in Washington, D. C., when he felt called to leave that ministry and start the Community of Hope in the city’s riot corridor. Nees wrote in 2005: “I have kept Dr. Wynkoop’s little book of college lectures *John Wesley: Christian Revolutionary* . . . close by since it was published. In it she was one of the first Wesleyan/Nazarene theologians to call our attention to Wesley’s mission to the poor and disenfranchised. . . she made an important distinction between what she identified as ‘caricatures’ and ‘characteristics’ of holiness. She advanced this idea in ‘A Theology of Love’ where she wrote about the ‘credibility gap’ in the Wesleyan Holiness movement. For some of us who were dissatisfied with the presentation of holiness in the mid-20th century, she gave us reason to commit ourselves to the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition with its call to authentic spirituality linked to social Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

Wynkoop’s desire to reconnect piety and social concern were evident in her class lectures and in such courses as “Radical Christian Movements” and “Sanctification and Liberation,” courses she taught at Nazarene Theological Seminary. In important ways, the emphases of the “Young Evangelicals” were simply an extension of the post-fundamentalist project, updated by a new generation that differed in style and tone from the generations preceding them. Wynkoop’s personal identification with “young evangelical” themes was an important marker of her personal commitment to the notion that “evangelical Wesleyanism” was a theological posture of continuing relevance.

Wynkoop consciously participated in a new exploration of John Wesley’s theology as “a corrective” to the mid-20th century theology of the holiness movement. She referred to the type of holiness theology that dominated the Nazarenes and similar Wesleyan churches at the mid-twentieth century as “holiness scholasticism,” a term she evidently borrowed from John Allan Knight. The term alludes to the “Scholastic period” in Protestant Orthodoxy in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, in which theological logic and doctrinaire posturing seemed to be of more vital concern to theologians than theology’s heart. Knight’s and Wynkoop’s use of the term pushed back against the moral legalism and the arid apologetics of fundamentalism that had “hardened the arteries” of the mid-20th century holiness movement.

The broader revival of interest in Wesley studies was led by United Methodists Albert Outler, Robert E. Cushman, and other post-liberal theologians, who made a turn back to orthodox theology in the 1960s. Outler described their vision in these terms: back to Wesley does not mean returning to an antique theology. It means back to Wesley, then back behind Wesley to his sources, then forward to our own time and into the future.<sup>20</sup>

Wynkoop agreed largely with this agenda, but she operated in a context quite different from that of the United Methodists. Their rediscovery of Wesley was a corrective to liberal

---

<sup>19</sup> Tom Nees to Stan Ingersol, August 26, 2005. E-mail. Copies in the Tom Nees profile folder and the Mildred Wynkoop profile folder, Nazarene Archives.

<sup>20</sup> On the renewal of interest in Wesley Studies, see Frank Baker, “Unfolding John Wesley: A Survey of Twenty Years’ Studies in Wesley’s Thought,” *Quarterly Review* (Fall 1980): 44-58; and Albert C. Outler, “The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition” in Kenneth E. Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition: Essays delivered at Drew University in celebration of the commencement of the publication of the Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1976): 11-38.



theology and an alternative to the Reformed versions of neo-orthodox theology that predominated in her era. Her rediscovery of Wesley was a corrective to Nazarene fundamentalism, with its narrowing of the categories.

For her, Wesley was a model Christian who combined the role of evangelist with an active concern for the physical and social welfare of the poor. By contrast, the Church of the Nazarene had abandoned nearly all of its social ministries by 1950 except for the medical ministries that it operated in Africa and Asia through the Department of World Missions. Wesley's spiritual life was nurtured by the sacramental practices of the Church of England and the measured pace of worship through use of its *Book of Common Prayer*, and by the devotional practices and language of the movement known as Pietism. Nazarenes, however, lived only out of the Pietist portion of their heritage and cast suspicious eyes on the Wesleyan tradition's liturgical heritage. To Wynkoop, Nazarene theological life seemed truncated, while Wesley's theological life seemed "full-orbed." Occasionally she said: "I am a John Wesley-type Wesleyan, and the question my life poses is whether or not there is room in the church for a Wesleyan of the John Wesley-type."<sup>21</sup>

Wynkoop's evaluation of Wesley's continuing relevance can be understood as one dimension of the post-fundamentalist project—a Wesleyan version of the agenda of Carl Henry, E. J. Carnell, Bernard Ramm, and others to re-evaluate the sources of Protestant theology, set aside the "small talk of the cult," and renew evangelical conversation along historic themes. But Wynkoop understood that a similar project carried out for Nazarenes and their theological kin involved re-evaluating the sources of the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition. She was greatly interested in the work of her brother, Carl, who specialized in Arminius studies. She learned from him. Her particular contribution, though, was to focus on Wesley. She regarded John Wesley as a model for holding together theological values that the American revivalist experience had rent asunder. She looked to the man, his mission, and his theology, and she set out to understand and reinterpret his theology for her own time.

### *Authentic Holiness*

Wynkoop's students soon learned that "static" was a bad word in her vocabulary. She equated it with deadliness. She equated the word "dynamic" with life. In lectures and class handouts, she demonstrated a continuing concern to underscore the dynamic element—a dynamic view of scripture, a dynamic understanding of faith, and a dynamic view of the church.

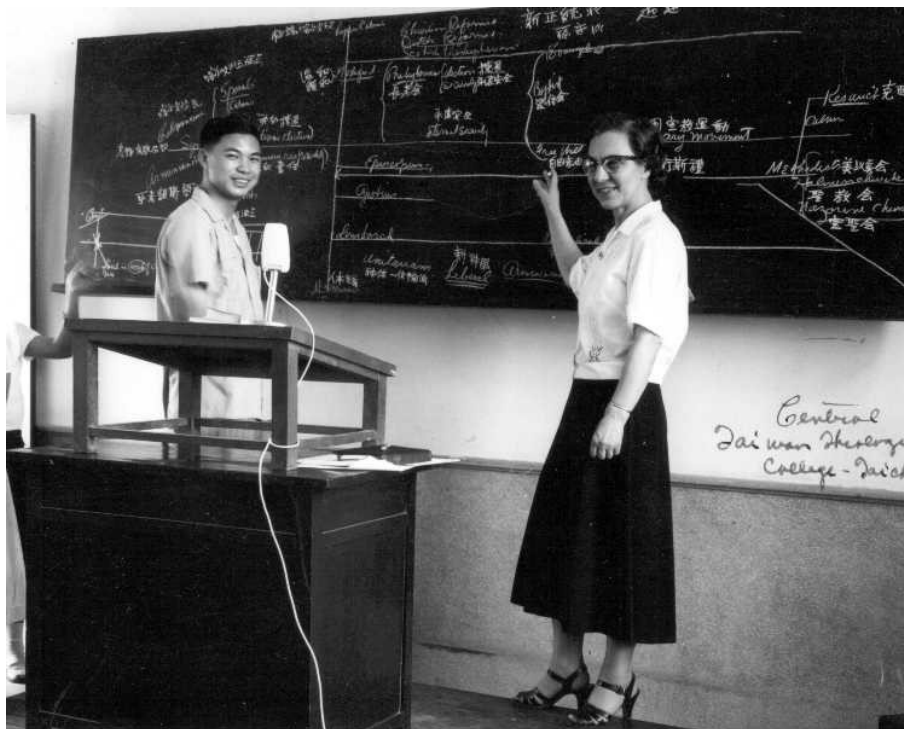
Wynkoop's primary theological question was that of Christian holiness, particularly in everyday life. She grasped intuitively that theology in the Wesleyan tradition is about *experienced doctrine*, not merely formulated doctrine.<sup>22</sup> She spoke often of "the holiness credibility gap"—a problem in the coherence—or lack of coherence—between a doctrine and a life. Her quest to understand holiness and human life was reflected in the titles of courses that she taught, such as "Holiness and Human Development" and "Sanctification and Liberation,"

---

<sup>21</sup> This writer took four classes with Wynkoop and heard her make this comment multiple times. William Greathouse was known for saying something quite similar.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of Methodist theology as *experienced doctrine* is best expressed in Chapter 2, "Scriptural Christianity: John Wesley's Theology of Grace," in Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

and in addresses such as “Holiness: the Humanizing Experience.” She addressed the problem particularly in *A Theology of Love*. The book reflects her life-long interest in Personalism, which was awakened during her college years studying under Wiley.<sup>23</sup> The book was also influenced by Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* and Daniel Day Williams’ *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*.<sup>24</sup> Above all, it was influenced by her own reading and re-reading of John Wesley.



Teaching in Taiwan Theological College

A significant stimulus for her thinking about relational holiness was her missionary service. In an oral history session, she stated that her relational theology developed while she was a missionary teacher in the Far East, first in Taiwan, then in Japan. She discovered a serious limitation when she lectured to Asian students on holiness and assigned them to read standard holiness texts of that day. She found that the language of holiness theology did not communicate as easily to Asian minds. So she began teaching Wesleyan theology in relational terms, with a Bible in one hand and the Asian cultural context (as she understood it) in the other. If Biblical doctrine is authentic, she insisted, it is communicated in other cultures without being run first through a Western filter.<sup>25</sup>

At the Nazarene Theology Conference in 1993, I sat with a couple from the Wesleyan Church who taught at a holiness school in Hong Kong. They inquired if Mildred Wynkoop was still alive and were happy to learn that she was living in a Kansas City suburb. They explained their interest: they said that their Asian students benefited more and felt a deeper connection to

<sup>23</sup> Wiley had studied with John Wright Buckham, the Personalist philosopher, at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>24</sup> Wynkoop’s copy of *I and Thou*, with her marginalia, is in her collection in the Nazarene Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Mildred Wynkoop Oral History Interview, October 15, 1991.

Wesleyan theology after reading *A Theology of Love* than they did from reading older and more standard works of Wesleyan holiness literature. Wynkoop would have been pleased.

The missionary intentions behind *A Theology of Love* are little known and rarely appreciated. Yet from the time Wynkoop was a child, she felt like she “wanted the preacher to explain things” more clearly. When she entered the ministry, her goal was to be a “teacher-type preacher” who explained things to the people.<sup>26</sup> Many Americans who grew up in Wesleyan holiness churches resonated with *A Theology of Love* when they first read it, regarding it as a more logical explanation of Christian holiness than what they had often heard in preaching or in Sunday school class.

*A Theology of Love* met with approval by some and disapproval by others. Those who disapproved were generally conservative and traditional and were uncomfortable with the relational framework that Wynkoop used, since it was new and different. In South Africa, Gideon Tredoux was removed from a teaching position because he had adopted Wynkoop’s perspective. This occurred shortly after a general superintendent visited the region.<sup>27</sup> Religion majors at one Nazarene college were encouraged not to attend Nazarene Theological Seminary after Wynkoop joined its faculty; the students were told that the seminary was now “infected with *Wynkoopism*.” Some went anyway and even took her classes, where they found that *Wynkoopism* was the hobgoblin that did not exist. Instead, they were invited to share her quest to make the Wesleyan theological tradition relevant and meaningful.

Donald Dayton was an early reviewer who approached *A Theology of Love* with great optimism. Dayton was one of “the young evangelicals,” and his review appeared in *The Other Side*, a young evangelical magazine. Dayton was struck by the seamlessness with which Wynkoop’s Wesleyan theology brought together spirituality and social ethics. He noted that her book places the focus on love as the content of Christian experience. This, he said, demythologizes “magical ideas of salvation” and places the emphasis on faith as “a changed direction of confidence and affection.” Faith is morally oriented because human life and the gospel are social in nature. Wynkoop’s emphasis on faith and love working together provides the basis for Christian involvement in the world and is the basis for Christian engagement with society.<sup>28</sup>

Thirty years later, Tom Noble wrote appreciatively of the book’s place in the corpus of Wesleyan-holiness theology. He stated that the “heart of Wesley’s doctrine . . . was presented supremely” by Wynkoop in this book, and that her recovery of Wesley and “the exposition of the heart of his conception of ‘Christian perfection’” was received quite well by the faculty at British Isles Nazarene College (now Nazarene Theological College—Manchester). It encouraged them to believe that “the narrow stereotypes and false exegesis which had too often characterized the holiness movement [in America] were not truly representative of the Wesleyan tradition.” Her work persuaded them that there was a roominess in Wesleyan theology, and that this “could be

---

<sup>26</sup> Wynkoop. “The Epworth Pulpit Interviews Mildred Wynkoop,” *The Epworth Pulpit* (November 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Gideon Tredoux’s son, Johan, is a leading specialist in Wynkoop’s theology. See his recent work *Mildred Bangs Wynkoop: Her Life and Thought* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Donald W. Dayton, “A Theology of Love: the Dynamic of Wesleyanism: A Book Review,” *The Other Side* (May-June 1974): 41-45.

expounded and preached . . . in the more sophisticated and skeptical culture of Christian Britain and Europe.”<sup>29</sup>

Paul Bassett also regarded *A Theology of Love* approvingly. The book, he told a group, demonstrates that “conservative Wesleyan theology” has “considerable flexibility.” He noted that the structure Wynkoop used was “quite different from that to which it [the tradition] had become accustomed—and with which it appeared to be necessarily and essentially allied—since the work of Richard Watson, a century and a half back.” But Wynkoop had demonstrated that there was more than one way to be Wesleyan and to do Wesleyan theology, “more than one way to understand and to talk about entire sanctification and the life of holiness.” Bassett noted that Wesleyan theologians have often debated one another vigorously, but only “at points of detail, almost never at the point of placing the insights of Wesley and his spiritual progeny in another structure altogether.” He thought that some would have problems with some of the insights Wynkoop had gathered from process and existentialist theologies, but he concluded that *A Theology of Love* was a significant work on balance and that her description of sin and righteousness “in terms of interpersonal relationships has helped us a great deal.”<sup>30</sup>

Thus, a book shaped by the effort to communicate the message of Christian holiness in a way that bridged the gulf between Asian and Western cultures also became a bridge over other gulfs in the church.

### *Epilogue*

Two years after she died in 1997, Mildred Wynkoop’s ashes were scattered on a hillside on the grounds of Nazarene Theological Seminary, the school where she had served as “Theologian in Residence” at the end of her career. The ashes of Ralph, her husband, were scattered at the same spot on a later date.<sup>31</sup> Her parents’ ashes, and those of other family members, were scattered on a more majestic prominence, that of Mt. Rainier.

Early in the 20th century, Mt. Rainier captured the imagination of the Bangs family, who, on a clear day, could see it in the far distance from Seattle. The mountain was an object of grandeur and fascination, and the family made annual pilgrimages there.<sup>32</sup> These periodic visits were part of Mildred Wynkoop’s spiritual journey, as they were for her siblings. Wynkoop was an avid photographer, and she amply documented Mt. Rainier in her photograph collection. She photographed the summit from different angles and took pictures of its woods and streams. As the Bangs siblings left home for college, married, started careers, and went their separate ways, spreading out to other parts of the United States, and indeed other parts of the world, they returned to Mt. Rainier across the years to hold family reunions. There on the mount, family, the common pleasures of nature’s sights, smells, and sounds, and the shared life of the spirit were reaffirmed and always treasured.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Called to be Saints: A Centenary History of the Church of the Nazarene in the British Isles, 1906-2006* (Manchester: Didsbury Press, 2006): 294-296.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Merritt Bassett, unpublished lecture, Paul Merritt Bassett Collection, Nazarene Archives.

<sup>31</sup> The writer was present when Mildred Wynkoop’s ashes were scattered. Dr. Jesse Middendorf was the officiating minister. Middendorf recently confirmed that Ralph’s ashes were also scattered at the site.

<sup>32</sup> Each year, one family member had to remain behind to take care of the cows.



---

This article originated as an after-dinner talk at Point Loma Nazarene University in 2005. It accompanied a slide show that, I hoped, would keep the audience awake after their dinner. The next day, a symposium was held on the centennial of Mildred Wynkoop's birth. Because the symposium focused on her theology, I saw my task as focusing on the person I had known, and so the original title of this piece "The Woman Behind the Words."

This published version incorporates some of the pictures used in the slide show. All images are from the Mildred Bangs Wynkoop Collection in the Nazarene Archives.