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Methodism and Empire

Christianity was born in the context of the Roman Empire. The temptation to adapt to empire and to become a part of it has accompanied Christianity ever since. Jesus himself was tempted by an imperial mindset. The temptations he endured, as reported in the gospels, are the temptations of empire. One example is the devil's offer of control over all the empires of the world, which Jesus duly declines (Matth. 4:8-10).

What if we take a look at Methodism in this perspective? How does Methodism fare when it hooks up with empire? In this investigation, we have to deal with two key problems. The first problem has to do with the metamorphoses of Empire. We are usually able to identify empire in its most blatant forms, like for instance in the Roman Empire, the Crusades of the medieval empires, nineteenth century colonialism, the German *Third Reich*, and several of the current moves of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush. In all these cases, the term empire is used (and often positively embraced), and the contemporary situation in the United States is no exception. But what about softer forms of power? What about the U.S. before Bush? What about the soft colonialisms of earlier times, whose emissaries were supposed to help, educate, train, and support? What about a Bartolomé de Las Casas, for instance, who defended the humanity of the

Amerindians but kept insisting on their need for improvement (since their humanity was located at a somewhat lower cultural and religious level than that of the missionaries)?¹

The second problem has to do with simplistic assumptions about religion and politics and the relation of the two. It is commonly known that the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. was called and shaped by the Emperor Constantine. Unfortunately, the problem has usually been addressed by separating religion and politics. Most theologians proceed as if there was somehow an underlying pristine theological core, more or less untouched by the political affairs of the empire. The modern conceptual separation of religion and politics has only made things worse in this regard. But can we really assume that religion and politics run on different tracks? Was not Constantine's politics undergirded by a robust theology, which clearly identified God at work in favor of the empire? And can an alternative theology even be imagined without alternative political connotations?

John Wesley offers a first clue that helps us address those two problems. In a brief entry in his Journal of May 25, 1764 he says: "Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men."² This is a remarkable insight on many levels. I have commented on it in other places, particularly in my introduction to *Methodist and Radical*.³ Wesley's statement contributes a new vision on the two problems noted above: it illumines the relation of religion and politics and it helps us get our bearings on empire.

¹ For an account of Las Casas along those lines see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), chapter 4.

² John Wesley, *Journal* 25 May 1764), in: *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. 21 (London, 1872; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1958), 466.

³ Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent, eds., *Methodist and Radical, Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2003).

Let me start with the second problem, the relation of religion and politics. Mainline theology has hardly considered the possibility that religion might have a certain directionality. Wesley talks about religion going from the top down. Clearly, this is a comment on religion in relation to power. There is a problem, says Wesley, when religion works hand in glove with top-down power. This insight foreshadows what the field of contemporary cultural studies is in the process of investigating: the relationships between cultural (and religious) forces and power. How does the history of Methodism and Methodist theology shape up in light of this question? A whole new field of research opens up here. If we begin to understand that there is a certain combination of religion and politics that is problematic, what is the alternative? Some might think that we should simply separate religion from politics. But that option does not appear to exist in Wesley's statement. Those on top—the "greatest," who are used to operating from the top down and who make things happen that way—follow a certain logic that somehow shapes the logic of a certain kind of religion. We might add that even those in the middle who look to the top to get things done become part of this logic.

The alternative would be to think about religion that moves from the bottom up, which happens to be the initial direction of the Methodist movement. Religion and power are not separated here but put together in a different way. The power of religion which these early Methodists saw at work moved from the bottom up, no doubt a surprise to many, thereby raising some interesting theological questions. If this bottom-up power, unlike top-down power, cannot immediately be explained as being "of men," whose power is it? This view from the underside has found its way even into the hymns and

poetry of the Methodist movement, although it is not surprising that the following hymn by Charles Wesley cannot be found in most current hymnals:

“The rich and great in every age
Conspire to persecute their God.
Our Saviour, by the rich unknown,
Is worshipped by the poor alone.”⁴

John Wesley’s statement about the direction of religion also helps us deal with the first problem, the definition of empire. Empire might be understood in very broad terms as this top-down power which is “of men,” which has the means to control everything else and thus to shape the world in its own image. This top-down power can take many different shapes and forms. It is perhaps most clearly visible in the use of military force; throwing bombs out of airplanes symbolizes a power that moves straight from the top down and that approaches omnipotence the less it has to fear repercussions (following the classical logic of Aristotle’s first unmoved mover). But this top-down power might also be embodied in certain humanitarian efforts that seek to bring to perceived benefits and achievements of our lifestyles to others. Teaching others “how to fish” (instead of giving them fish), the paradigm of a much-admired program even today, assumes that other people elsewhere are simply incapable of taking care of their most basic needs. This means that we need to look for empire even in postcolonial times, when most of the classic nineteenth and twentieth century colonialisms have been brought to an end. Top-down power is a pervasive problem, and we need to address it as theologians and Christians not merely as a political issue but, more importantly, because it shapes our

⁴ Charles Wesley, quoted in: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 166-67.

theology and our faith, whether we realize it or not. In other words, we are dealing with a pristine theological issue here.

In sum, the problem with empire is the sort of top-down power that moves from “the greatest to the least” and which is unable to take seriously alternative expressions and ways of life. The result is that the expressions of the divine that do not fit with the status quo are not taken seriously either. The theological problem is that our images of God and God’s power are shaped by factors for which much theology as it is done now is not capable of giving an account. Of course, alternative theological expressions may be allowed in order to provide some color and diversion, but these alternatives are always relegated to a secondary position. In two recent projects I have talked about this as empire, defined as massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life (even the religious) and which cannot be controlled by any one actor alone.⁵

A positive project grows out of these observations. If we begin to pay attention to how a theological tradition has been shaped by empire (consciously and unconsciously), we can then take a look at what I have called its “theological surplus,”⁶ e.g., that which escapes the clutches of empire and points beyond it. This is the good news: empire is not all-powerful. Empires have never been able to assimilate the divine completely; sometimes, we find the roots of these theological surpluses in a basic ambivalence. I have argued this point in more detail in *Christ and Empire*, looking various theological

⁵ Rieger, *Christ and Empire*; and Joerg Rieger, “Theology and Empires,” introduction to *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Kwok Pui-Lan, Don Compier, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁶ For a discussion of the concept of “surplus” and its roots see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 9.

developments from Paul to postcolonial times. In the following, I would like to take an initial look at the Methodist traditions.

Not only can theology help analyze what is going on, especially where empire assimilates concepts of the ultimate; theology can also point us in new directions and give us new hope. Throughout its history, theology has frequently been employed in the support of empire and occasionally in the critique of it, and often there is only a thin line between the two. Yet the existence of such ambivalence is itself a witness to the limits of empire. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha notes how ambivalence is disturbing to colonial discourse and how it “poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.”⁷ The challenge, he argues, is a “*double* vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”⁸ Ambivalence, especially the sort that is generated from the tensions and ruptures felt at the margins of empire, is thus a welcome companion in any effort to move beyond the confines of empire. This is the sort of ambivalence that David Hempton has found at the heart of Methodism: “Methodism at its heart and center had always been a profoundly countercultural movement. It drew energy and personal commitment from the dialectics

⁷ For the notion of ambivalence, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86. Bhabha connects this term with his more famous notion of “mimicry”: “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*” (emphasis in original). By repeating colonial images with a slight difference, rather than representing them accurately, mimicry establishes a challenge to the colonial narcissism and fiction of self-identity (ibid. 88).

⁸ Ibid., 88. While Bhabha sees this ambivalence of mimicry as a surface effect and does not want to see this as too closely related with the Freudian notion of the “return of the repressed,” I do not think that these matters are mutually exclusive. For an effort to read Bhabha’s work in relation to the notion repression see my essay “Liberating God-Talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins,” in: *Postcolonialism and Theology*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004).

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arising from its challenge to accepted norms in religion and society. It thrived on opposition, but it could not long survive equipoise.”⁹ Could this lack of ambivalence produced at the margins be one of the reasons of the current malaise of Methodism?

One of the key insights of Hempton’s book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* is that Methodism thrived on dialectical tensions, beginning with Wesley himself: “It was Methodism’s genius that throughout the English-speaking world it was able to act for so long both as a countercultural movement of populist revivalism and as an enforcer of social stability and sobriety, though not always in the same place at the same time. It was Methodism’s misfortune... that it could not oscillate between these poles forever.”¹⁰

This is not to say that ambivalence and dialectical tensions are always modes of resistance to empire. E.P. Thompson, an important interpreter of Methodism who still deserves a hearing, points out a sort of ambivalence that contributes to empire, as we shall see.

The Beginnings

Like Christianity, Methodism was born in the context of empire. In England, the British Empire represented a typical colonial power. Of course, not everyone was in agreement with the direction of the colonial empire. One of the most prominent critiques came from Adam Smith who wondered openly about the economic profitability of having colonies. In so doing, he anticipated the contemporary situation where capitalism fares

⁹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 210.

¹⁰ Hempton, *Methodism*, 128. Hempton, *ibid.*, 203 lists the following dialectical tensions, going back to Wesley himself: between discipline and emotions, work ethic and ritual, emancipation for the oppressed and “unrelenting bourgeois ethic of acquisitiveness.”

better without colonies. John Wesley was among those who raised questions about the Empire for a completely different set of reasons, as Ted Jennings has shown.¹¹

Like early Christianity, Methodism had a radical edge that could not easily be assimilated to the regulations of empire. Early Methodists were considered to be “disturbers of the world.”¹² It is well known that Methodism had a tendency to get in trouble with traditional authorities, both social and ecclesial, and that it transgressed established boundaries between clergy and lay, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Clearly, the ambivalence that Methodism introduced into the empire’s struggle for order and control originated from below. In the words of David Hempton: “This lack of official control was exacerbated by the fact that Methodism often took strongest root in marginal areas, scattered settlements, and new industrial and mining environments where the traditional social cement was weakest.”¹³ Methodism has deep roots among lower class and marginalized people. In the U.S., for instance, African Americans who had resisted Christianity for almost a century, converted to Methodism after the 1770s.¹⁴

Even E.P. Thompson who otherwise identifies Methodism as a “religion for the poor” rather than “of the poor” (37) notes a countercultural spirit in early Methodism. In tension with Wesley’s more authoritarian style, Methodism included democratic elements, not only with its lay preachers but also with forms of self-government within the societies. In Thompson’s words: “Wesley could not escape the consequences of his

¹¹ Ted Jennings, “John Wesley,” in *Empire and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Kwok, Compier, and Rieger.

¹² Hempton, *Methodism*, 87.

¹³ Hempton, *Methodism*, 87.

¹⁴ Hempton, *Methodism*, 131-32.

own spiritual egalitarianism. If Christ's poor came to believe that their souls were as good as aristocratic or bourgeois souls then it might lead them on to the arguments of the *Rights of Man*.”¹⁵ To be sure, this is no empowerment “from above.” This is about people finding their own voice and developing their own resilience to the system.

Hempton, seeking to avoid a narrow interpretation of the Methodist movement in terms of class, insists that class conflict and religious conflict are always related. His point is well taken that religious movements are closely related to radical change and that social movements are never completely secular.¹⁶ There is no need to play off those two aspects of the struggle, an insight that opens the door for talking about class conflict in theology in a new way. Reductionism is not helpful, and much Marxist thought (a major informant on the realities of the class struggle) has developed in ways that respect the role of religion. Equally important for us as theologians, however, is to understand that a theological reductionism is not helpful either. Religion never develops in a vacuum and a decision needs to be made as to where it stands in regard to class, i.e., whether it will follow the way from the greatest to the least or not. In this regard, Albert Outler's notion of Wesley as a folk theologian might be helpful, but in inverted fashion. While Outler had in mind Wesley's gift to communicate “things above” to the lower classes, we need to wonder what it is that Wesley learned from the lower classes and how Methodist theology was able to hold on to a theological surplus and to make a difference for this reason.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 42.

¹⁶ David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-190* (London: Routledge, 1996), 173.

Nevertheless, Methodist resistance to empire is not without tensions. E.P. Thompson stands for others when he notes the traits of Methodism that made it fit for empire. The Methodist “work-discipline,” for instance, could easily lead to “psychic exploitation.” Moreover, Methodism, while supporting workers at times, also contributed to the ideology of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁷ The tensions are also portrayed by Gregory Schneider, who talks about the domestication of the Methodist impulse: “If it gave common people the opportunity to establish their own religious life, to think and act for themselves, it also catered to their need for charismatic and authoritarian ‘fathers’ who would perpetuate dependence in their spiritual ‘children’ and a nondemocratic ethos in what they called the ‘family of God.’” He continues that “the public, political significance of Methodism must be seen in similarly ambiguous terms.”¹⁸ Yet Schneider’s conclusion, that “the history of Methodist evangelicalism does not lend itself easily to any moral or political agenda, be it progressive or conservative,”¹⁹ does not necessarily follow. Jesus had it right: no one can serve two masters, God and Mammon. There is a sort of ambivalence that leads to an adjustment to the status quo, but there is also a sort of ambivalence that points to resistance.

When all is said and done, the fact that Methodism helped the laity to find its own voice and power, inside and outside the church, must not be overlooked. The “priesthood

¹⁷ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 401, puts it this way: “Methodism and Utilitarianism, taken together, make up the dominant ideology of the Industrial Revolution.” See also Thompson, *ibid.*, 375, 391. While seeking to challenge Thompson’s work, even Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 169, admits this clear awareness of the tensions to be the genius of Thompson’s work; Hempton stresses the positive side of the tensions, while Thompson identifies the problems.

¹⁸ A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), 207.

¹⁹ Schneider, *The Way of the Cross*, 208.

of all believers” had a tendency to unsettle the status quo both in the church and in the world.²⁰ A “theological surplus” can be found where lay people engage in functions once thought only appropriate for the clerical class, such as preaching and holding offices in the church. This story is not limited to the Methodism of the eighteenth century. My mother, coming to Methodism from the German Lutheran church in the 1960s and 1970s still made similar experiences: in a situation where there is little opportunity for lay persons, and women in particular, to assume positions of leadership, the Methodist communities made a real difference. It is not surprising that Methodism was received especially well “in areas least amenable to paternalistic influence.”²¹

In these developments, intent may be a secondary issue. While Wesley’s educational work may not have had a subversive intent, as Ken Bedell has argued, the question is how it functioned in the context of empire in which it found itself.²² This emphasis on education took clearly subversive shape in Primitive Methodism. In their Sunday Schools, they taught children not only to read (thought to be appropriate since it helped them to read the Bible), they also taught them writing and math in order to gain valuable skills, a praxis that was not endorsed by mainline Methodism.²³

In the United States, already the beginnings of Methodism are located in a postcolonial situation (although Native Americans have reminded us that internal

²⁰ W.R. Ward notes the importance of the “priesthood of all believers” in unsettling the status quo. W.R. Ward, “Pastoral Office and the General Priesthood in the Great Awakening,” *Studies in Church History* 26 (1989), 303-27.

²¹ Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 7.

²² Ken Bedell, “John Wesley, Empire and Paradise,” 19. Background paper for the Workgroup on Ethics, Economics, and Globalization, Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies, 2007.

²³ See Stephen Hatcher, “The Radicalism of Primitive Methodism,” in: *Methodist and Radical*, 128.

colonization continues). Note that the U.S. won its independence from Britain shortly before Methodism organized itself in 1784. Like capitalism, Methodism works better in a postcolonial situation, as the success story of Methodism (and capitalism) in the U.S. shows. From the U.S., Methodism spread in the wake of postcolonial expansion, adapting to the needs of a new situation. In many ways it accommodated to newly emerging imperial interests in ways that turned on their head the anti-imperial traits of early Methodism. Its shifting attitudes toward slavery are telling: from early opposition to slavery to later endorsement of it. When the Monroe Doctrine was put forth, declaring that U.S. interests included Latin America, Methodism was quick to respond by setting up schools and other initiatives.²⁴ When the idea of Manifest Destiny was formulated, Methodism did not stand up in protest. Under the conditions of a “postcolonial empire,” the lack of a response is often sufficient. In situations of substantial power differentials it is not necessary to promote empire actively—not to resist the flow is enough. Any theological surplus will have to be identified between the lines, following the sort of ambivalence that is produced from below, shining through for instance in African American Methodism and in other places at the margins.

²⁴ The role of education is noted for instance by José Míguez Bonino, “Methodism and Latin American Liberation Movements, in *Methodist and Radical*, 199. This emphasis on education became the hallmark of Methodist missions (Hempton, *Methodism*, 157). Already in 1897 John R. Mott notes the importance of education missions in the context of India: “Educational missions have opened a larger number of doors for the preaching of the gospel than any other agency.” John R. Mott, *Strategic Points in the World’s Conquest: The Universities and Colleges as Related to the Progress of Christianity* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1897), 96.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

This period merits somewhat closer scrutiny because it contains many of the seeds of the current postcolonial situation. A closer look at Methodism in the U.S. is warranted because here Methodism thrived during a longer period than elsewhere and with great intensity. The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of great energy. The laity was a driving force; Methodism's initial spread around the world was organized and carried out by lay people. The following observation by Hempton sets the stage: "Methodism, like Pentecostalism, was a cultural revolution from below, not a political or ecclesiastical program imposed from above. It grew without external sponsorship and thrived among youthful and mobile populations exploiting the opportunities of new global markets."²⁵ Note also that women made up the majority of members. In all of these developments, however, empire was never far: "From the British side Methodism followed the trade routes and military deployments of early imperialism... From the American side the push westward to the Pacific Ocean was equally relentless and inexorable."²⁶ This does not necessarily mean that Methodists were intentionally endorsing imperialism, nor they were always benefiting from it. There is no reason to

²⁵ Hempton, *Methodism*, 30.

²⁶ Hempton, *Methodism*, 152. Hempton, *ibid.*, 158, sums it up in terms of the two different imperialisms at work: "Methodism mapped the world on the back of two expanding civilizations. The first, the British, was to begin with an informal then a formal empire within which Methodism made its way through soldiers, sailors, migrants, traders, civilizers, and colonial governors. The second, the American, was an expansionist commercial empire, which sucked in migrants from all over the world and exported traders, educators, and doctors."

doubt that Methodists meant well and were intent on helping, even though the outcomes could be quite troublesome.²⁷

Here is another example of the ambivalence of Methodism when it comes to empire, an ambivalence that can produce not only resistance but also adaptation. Methodism did indeed thrive “on the margins and frontiers of race and class, continental expansion and empire.” While resistance was part of these tensions, Hempton makes us aware of another trajectory as well: “Everywhere, Methodists began as cultural outsiders, but through work discipline and unquenchable passion for education, they remorselessly moved to the cultural center, sometimes with remarkable speed.”²⁸ To be sure, Wesley questioned this sort of success story already in his own times; as the Methodists moved up in social status they seemed to lose their connection to the heart of the Methodist project. But this is often precisely what happened. In the U.S. slavery was first renounced and then affirmed; women were liberated and then subdued. In post-Wesleyan England, as conflicts erupted along the lines of class, radicals were expelled and gothic chapels were built due to the desire for respect and acceptability with the powers that be.²⁹

From the nineteenth century on, Methodism was officially recognized as mainline. By 1850, Methodists made up 34 percent of Christianity in the U.S., and money began to flow, changing some of the basic paradigms, like itinerant and egalitarian ministry. New qualities sought in preachers would make them more acceptable to the

²⁷ George Tinker has pointed this out with respect to the missionaries to the Native Americans in the U.S. See George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), noting that although the missionaries meant well and did not benefit from colonialism this did not prevent them from being part of the genocide.

²⁸ Hempton, *Methodism*, 31.

²⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 102ff, tells the history and notes (ibid., 105) that some of these conflicts exposed the contradictions of Wesley’s own legacy.

middle class, including education, learning, self-improvement, and a reputation for philanthropy.³⁰ Dominant culture and religion went increasingly hand in hand. As Dana Robert has pointed out: “The late nineteenth century women’s missionary movement conflated culture with religion, attributing the strengths of western culture to its Christianity, and the weaknesses of non-western culture to other religions.”³¹

The theological foundations of these developments lay in a fundamental trust in the perfectibility of humanity, and in so-called “providential” means such as the spread of empire and the English language; also fundamental were the emphasis on personal conversion, the witness of the spirit, the cultivation of perfect love, and the anticipation of heavenly rewards.³² In short, there was an overarching optimism at work, not unlike in contemporary liberal theological traditions, that was based on a firm trust in the righteousness of one’s own cause; and while it would have been clear that there are always shortcomings (“nobody is perfect,” as today’s liberals would say), there was little sense that the situation as a whole might be headed in the wrong direction.

An example of this theological optimism is the life and work of John R. Mott. His theological foundation was christocentric rather than anthropocentric. Central to his beliefs were the power of God and the lordship of Christ. Where the Social Gospel asserted “the Christian law” or the “Kingdom of God,” Mott asserted the lordship of

³⁰ Hempton, *Methodism*, 109, 125ff.

³¹ Dana L. Robert, “The Methodist Struggle over Higher Education in Fuzhou, China, 1877-1883,” *Methodist History* 34 (April 1996), 173-89.

³² Hempton, *Methodism*, 168; 177.

Christ.³³ In his early book *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, Mott insists that “God Himself has given all the increase.”³⁴

Mott was a mediator who sought to move Christianity to a position of global dominance. The “evangelization of the world in this generation” was his project.³⁵ He bridged the gap between the Social Gospel and conservative Christianity. He sought to bring together piety and progress, faith in God’s revelation in Christ with faith in the achievements of modern science.³⁶ Of great help in bridging these gaps was that both liberals and conservatives shared in a basic optimism, which pulled together Christ and progress. In the words of Bosch: “Both liberals and conservatives shared the assumption that Christianity was the only basis for a healthy civilization; this was a form of consensus so fundamental that it operated mainly on an unconscious, presuppositional level.”³⁷ While the shared goal of evangelizing the world in this generation was not always clearly defined and debates about the meaning of this task continued, it is not hard to see how a basic theological optimism combined with a sense of the value of Western civilization and of one’s own achievements would indeed provide strong bonds. Ambivalence here did not contribute to resistance but came to support the project:

³³ C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955: A Biography* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 276; Mott’s favorite hymn was “The Church’s One Foundation,” Hopkins, *ibid.*, 629.

³⁴ Mott, *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, 213.

³⁵ Mott, “The Obligation of This Generation to Evangelize the World,” address to the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York, 1900, referenced in Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 339. Norwood also notes how this call resonated around the world.

³⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 324, 337; Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 274.

³⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 296.

“Sometimes Mott and his co-workers succeeded in keeping the new and fragile ecumenical boat afloat with the aid of fortuitous or unintentional ambiguities.”³⁸

What was absent was a stance that would have provided a challenge. One of Mott’s biographers puts it this way: “It was contrary to his character and vocation to criticize, engage in destructive polemics, or attack friends and acquaintances whom muckrakers might smear as ‘malefactors of great wealth.’”³⁹ There was, however, a deeper theological reason for all this, having to do with the assumption that U.S. culture and its representatives were Christian already and that it was the others who needed a challenge. In 1904, Mott put it like this: “The primary work of the Church is to make Jesus Christ known and obeyed and loved throughout the world. By far the larger part of this undertaking is among the non-Christian nations.”⁴⁰

Empire lurks in the back, albeit in postcolonial fashion. Bosch describes the situation thus: “The United States was not involved in the scramble for colonies; missions, however, provided Americans with an important ‘moral equivalent’ for imperialism.”⁴¹ Just like the Northern European colonial powers were proud of having avoided the atrocities of the Spanish conquest, the United States were proud about having mostly avoided colonial entanglements. Foreign missions were seen as “national altruism” (Bosch’s term⁴²), responding to what Mott called “the range and depths of human need, and of the infinite value of Christ’s program to meet it.”⁴³

³⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 324-25.

³⁹ Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 274.

⁴⁰ Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 279.

⁴¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 301.

⁴² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 302.

⁴³ John R. Mott, *Cooperation and the World Mission* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1935), 28.

Most interesting is the fact that mission was less and less seen as a one-way street. Here is Hempton's take on the development of overseas missions: "On the whole they believed in forming partnerships with local people and not lording over them."⁴⁴ One of the examples is the work of William Taylor, one of the most prominent missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. The approach of Mott shows similar traits. His little book *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest* describes the formation of the World Student Christian Federation with the goal that "there may go forth from them hosts of young men for the spiritual conquest of the world."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in this partnership Mott identifies a clear top-down structure: "God has given to some movements a larger and richer experience than others." The narrative begins with the U.S. and then moves on to Britain: "Because of her world-wide empire Great Britain is able ... to do more for missions than any other land. Fully one third of the non-Christian world is under her own flag, and her political influence is probably great with another third than is that of any other Protestant power." Germany is next, since "the German universities are the most influential in the world of thought."⁴⁶

The later Mott appears to be somewhat more enlightened, calling for an end to the distinction between "sending" and "receiving" churches in 1928. Still, as Bosch notes, the younger churches did not quite experience it that way and paternalism often persisted.⁴⁷ Mott's emphasis on collaboration is quite telling: Christ himself calls for Christian leaders to "transcend" their "denominational, party, national, and racial

⁴⁴ Hempton, *Methodism*, 168.

⁴⁵ Mott, *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, 23; Africa is conspicuously absent in this alliance.

⁴⁶ Mott, *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, 20; 30-31; 34.

⁴⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 465.

boundaries.”⁴⁸ But as the “younger Churches” go their own ways, they somehow need the guidance of the older churches since “we must now keep in view the necessity that these young Churches be preserved from isolation and from the dangers that isolation brings.”⁴⁹ Mott notes that both the younger and the older churches benefit from collaboration, but collaboration is in firm hands as the “mission boards of Europe and North America” begin to “unite in sending out to the fields which they are serving groups of their most statesmanlike representatives to take counsel with the trusted leaders of the Churches and missions.” While Mott rejects “any sense of superiority or inferiority,” a “full recognition of the varieties of Christian experience,” and “a frank admission that no one member of the group possesses all the truth, but that each has some special contribution,”⁵⁰ there is nowhere a call for the reversal of power structures. This particular embodiment of what we today might call “unity in difference” leaves the conventional power structures intact.

There is no reason to doubt that Mott’s intentions were benevolent and that he took his theological commitments seriously. In all this, he sought not only to follow Christ but to extend the reach of Christ ever further. Yet here Christ as Lord looked suspiciously like the lords of the age, like the politicians or the business leaders with whom Mott was in close relation and who shared and supported his ambitious goals.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Mott, *Cooperation*, 9.

⁴⁹ Mott, *Cooperation*, 13; 34.

⁵⁰ Mott, *Cooperation*, 15; 29.

⁵¹ “One of the most nobly useful men in the world,” is President Wilson’s assessment of Mott in 1914 (Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 435). Mott also endorsed the campaign of presidential candidate Herbert Hoover (Hopkins, *ibid.*, 667). Keep in mind that the funding sources for Mott’s projects were tremendous. Mott “merely needed to ask for funds to support almost any project; he was rarely refused.” The extremely wealthy, including the Robber Barons and their heirs “early trusted him to spend, or invest, a part

What was lost was a sense that the lordship of Christ might take alternative shapes that challenge even the most benevolent status quo. While this was the general mood of the age, critical voices were also projected early on. Already in 1898, an article in the *Methodist Review* pointed out the close link missionary and colonial interests: “There is no chance to shut one’s eyes to the relation of missions to the success of governmental colonizing schemes.”⁵² The quest for a theological surplus is not only ours.

There is indeed a theological surplus to be mined here. It can perhaps best be seen in a different area that today escapes the attention of most of the churches: the world of labor. It cannot be denied that Methodism thrived under the rules of Adam Smith’s capitalism. There are clear parallels between Methodism and Adam Smith’s model of a “religious free market” including its character as popular religious association, its emphasis on discipline, and the fact that it was financed by voluntary contributions and book sales.⁵³ Yet capitalism and the industrial revolution created strong tensions, especially for the workforces that ensured its success. Wesley and some of the early Methodists were aware of these problems. And while in the course nineteenth century this awareness faded, it was to be recovered at the turn of the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with the force of its global expansion growing ever stronger, Methodism had become middle class. Religious virtue and economic success were associated, as well as economic failure and immorality. The current phenomenon of the “Gospel of Prosperity” has deep roots in the logic of middle class theology and is shared by the mainline churches insofar as God is commonly

of their surplus in instrumentalities dedicated to human betterment through religious agencies.” Hopkins, *ibid.*, 51.

⁵² Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 347.

⁵³ Hempton, *Methodism*, 46-47.

identified at the top and with the successful—an issue that is still not addressed even today.⁵⁴ Frederick Norwood puts it in strong words: “In every case the leadership of the local church has been dominated by the managerial class... Sometimes the churches have been practically owned by the dominant industrial power.”⁵⁵ It might not be a bad idea to take a look at who dominates the leadership of the United Church today.

Nevertheless, the church did not abandon the workers altogether, thus preserving the source of another classical Methodist ambivalence that would lead not only to challenges to empire but also to a theological surplus. During the steel strike of 1919, for instance, the Interchurch World Movement and the Federal Council of Churches set up a commission of inquiry, which reported to President Wilson, chaired by none other than John R. Mott. This commission documented abuses of workers such as the twelve-hour day, low pay, seven-day weeks, long shifts, and lack of input for workers. In the wake of this new awareness of labor issues, many of these evils were corrected and attitudes of church people changed.⁵⁶ A 1893 speech by Mott captures a potential theological surplus emerging from his focus on Christ: “If Christ were to travel in our country today, he would be concerned about the poor and [in Andrew Carnegies’ phrase] could teach the rich the true ‘gospel of wealth.’” Mott appears here as an early proponent of the now popular question “what would Jesus do?” Since Jesus does not walk among us, he argues

⁵⁴ This observation, that I made in a 30-minute interview with journalist Jeff Chu, was dropped in the published version of the article by David van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want you to Be Rich?” *Time Magazine* (September 10, 2006). Available on the web: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-7,00.html>. Obviously, it is a lot easier to point fingers at others than to admit what is going on in the mainline. Chu’s question to me was “how can good Methodists and Episcopalians and Presbyterians can believe that sort of thing?”

⁵⁵ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 399; the comment is about the early twentieth century.

⁵⁶ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 400.

that we need to “go back to Christ.”⁵⁷ While a better question would be Frederick Herzog’s quest for what Jesus is doing now, Mott’s Christ implies a certain challenge to the status quo as theology begins to get in touch with the underside.

In a 1908 address Mott refers to Jesus in order to put an end to the all-too-common separation of religion and politics that tends to support the powers that be: “Jesus Christ is Lord and therefore must reign. He only has authority to rule social practices. He must dominate His followers and all society in all their relationships: domestic, industrial, commercial, civic, national, and international.... There are not two gospels, one social and one individual. There is but one Christ.” Later, in 1921, he encourages the national YMCA to “bring all social relations of young men under the rule of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸ The Kingdom of God, Mott realizes, should include “the kingdoms of finance, commerce, industry, labor, the movies, the press, learning, and of society, because Christ is to be Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.” Clearly, there is some ambivalence here that does not sit altogether well with empire when Mott talks about “the larger Christ” and the “larger evangelism”⁵⁹; what would happen if Christ cannot be relegated to a narrowly religious realm and if Christ is indeed somehow be concerned with those on the underside that the status quo refuses to notice?

To be sure, the perspective from below tends to become more popular in times of great pressure, and the Great Depression in the U.S. forced people to face basic economic questions and conditions. In 1930 even the Methodist Bishops noted deep problems “with a social system that, in the midst of plenteous abundance, dooms untold numbers of our

⁵⁷ Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 275.

⁵⁸ Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 276; 623.

⁵⁹ Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 628.

people to unbearable poverty and distress through no apparent fault of their own.”⁶⁰ While the first Social Creed was adopted already at the General Conference of 1908,⁶¹ this Creed was developed further in light of the tensions of industrialized society; subsequent embodiments of the Social Creed became the foundation for later legislation, like the eight-hour day, worker’s safety and compensation, social security, unionization, insurance, and retirement.⁶² The theological surplus can be identified when these issues are not seen as merely social or political ones (a common strategy to discount the importance of such perspectives) but as related to the reality of God in Christ.

To be sure, the foundations of empire remained in place, but the fact that Methodism mustered a theological surplus and contributed to resistance needs to be noted in our own time, when much of this is hard to imagine. Can we today even envision a stance as the one taken by the Methodist Federation for Social Action in the 1930s, as: “an organization which seeks to abolish the profit system in order to develop a classless society based upon the obligation of mutual service”?⁶³ While this stance was not appreciated by everyone, it does point to a theological surplus that cannot easily captured by the status quo and to a fundamental ambivalence that proves to be a challenge to any top-down power that seeks to control our lives and our images of God.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 400.

⁶¹ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 353-54; 391.

⁶² Note that the beginning of the nineteenth century, the workday was 10 hours, six days a week; it went up from that to seventy ours a week; unionization and collective bargaining were opposed; Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 399.

⁶³ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 393

The Postcolonial Empire

Within the confines of this paper this issue needs to be addressed more briefly. My comments are designed to indicate the need for a broader research project. Talking about a postcolonial empire appears, at first sight, to be counterintuitive. How can an empire exist without colonies? The current war in Iraq helps illustrate what is at stake.⁶⁴ Whatever the real interests of the Bush administration to wage war against the nation of Iraq may have been, it is clear that no efforts were made to turn Iraq into a traditional colony. No U.S. governor was instituted, and Iraq was to maintain its national independence as well as its ownership of the land and natural resources. At the same time, the economic benefits for the U.S. are substantial. While the oil reserves are owned by Iraq, U.S. companies are in charge of production through production-sharing agreements. Economically, these agreements are much more convenient than previous colonial arrangements and they are much less visible; they are also more lucrative, as Adam Smith predicted. Once the war ends and everything appears back to normal, the public will hardly be aware of the structures of empire. In general, a postcolonial empire that operates on the basis of economic ties and other links at the level of culture and media (constantly expanding through new technologies) is not only less visible but also more effective and all-encompassing than early colonial models.

While some theologians may be aware of this issue, few have addressed its theological implications. Since the postcolonial empire is rather invisible in the countries that benefit the most from it—except in times like the present when some governments engage in saber rattling of rather questionable success—few tend to notice and address

⁶⁴ For a more detailed account see *Christ and Empire* and David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the issue. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that since colonialism is a thing of the past we can go back to business as usual. While the famous book by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, thoroughly examines the failures of mission under colonialism, Bosch somehow assumes that since these times are behind us the churches can now celebrate the classical missionary spirit once again, in postmodern innocence.⁶⁵

This brings us to one of the key features of the postcolonial situation, which consists of an increasing cover-up of the powers of empire, accompanied by an ever further reach of those powers into our lives. Political and (somewhat less visible) economic forces are joined by cultural forces (including media and technology), psychological forces (the advertising industry, for instance, seeks to impact our deepest desires), religious forces (not just the Religious Right but also other mainline and even liberal ventures), etc. The asymmetry of power is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary situation, where resistance is supposed to be futile, an assumption that is internalized by many. In this context, the problem is not only with direct support of empire. Mainline efforts at pursuing a middle road also become quite problematic. Friedrich von Logau's saying that "in situations of great danger and need the middle road leads to death" applies here.⁶⁶ When power is distributed asymmetrically, those who attempt to hang out in the middle will inevitably be drawn in the direction of the greater pull and what is worse, this happens mostly without detection. In the contemporary U.S.,

⁶⁵ For a fuller account see my essay "Theology and Mission in a Postcolonial World." *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 21:2 (2004), 201-27. To be sure, I am not arguing against mission as such; my point is that we need to become aware of the current asymmetries of power before we can take up the matter again.

⁶⁶ "In Gefahr und großer Not bring der Mittelweg den Ton." For more detail see my essay "The Middle Road Leads to Death," *Zion's Herald* 180:1 (January/February 2006), 5,6, 44.

the so-called “centrists” are invariably pulled to the political right, whether or not they are aware of it and whether or not they subscribe to its tenets. It would be quite interesting to examine for instance Albert Outler’s groundbreaking efforts as a centrist (finding promise in a “right-and-center coalition”)⁶⁷ in this light, as well as Scott Jones’ notion of Methodist doctrine as the “Extreme Center.” What does it really mean to claim, as Jones does, that “on the theological spectrum Wesley occupies the extreme center”⁶⁸ and to assume that this is the place of the United Methodist Church? It seems to me that if Wesley brought together “extremes” like evangelism and justice ministries, it was not for the sake of finding a “balance” or “middle road”; rather, as those elements met in the lives of those following Christ, something new emerged—a surplus bigger than the sum of its parts—and this points to the genius and the energy of Methodism.

A recent comment by Jones regarding the construction of a library and a partisan institute by the Bush Foundation in honor of President George W. Bush at Southern Methodist University shines some light on the problem: “I know that George W. Bush’s membership in the United Methodist Church has been controversial for some in our church who disagree with his policies. Our Church embraces a wide spectrum of political views and I am proud of this. I am grateful that the UMC includes both Senator Hilary Clinton and President Bush as active, faithful members. At times I disagree with both, and at times I agree with both. But they are my sister and brother in Christ, and I claim

⁶⁷ This term is used in one of Outler’s letters to Ed Robb, reproduced in Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 220. This gives many insights in the sort of middle road that is characteristic of Outler’s work, its theological parameters, and the political negotiations of Outler.

⁶⁸ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 19; Jones assumes that a middle road exists between worship and social action, evangelism and justice ministries, spiritual formation and political involvement.

them as part of my United Methodist family.”⁶⁹ Obviously, this statement is written by a centrist who sees no need to raise the bigger question whether “right” and “left” in this spectrum are true to the mission of the church. Membership in the UMC seems to be sufficient, and the main task of the centrist is to find a comfortable middle ground in the context of some standard U.S. view of “right” and “left”—neither of which is free from empire, despite different preferences for “hard” or “soft” power. There is little sense that there may be a place that is outside of this spectrum altogether—and that this place might be where God is found at work; no search for a theological surplus is thus required.

The middle road is crucial for the postcolonial empire because it allows for undetected moves in the direction of the powers that be; in addition, it also provides the kind of stability that buffers the escapades of more extreme adventures in the direction of empire. For this reason, empire will not come to an end when the distribution of power between mainline political parties shifts once again. Nevertheless, the more extreme moves must not be taken lightly because they will shape us for a long time to come because the middle road moves with them; it stands to reason that the middle road in the current U.S. is further to the right than it was just a few decades ago. Not long ago I heard a report from one of the largest Methodist churches in Texas where it appears to be no longer acceptable to speak of the poor: any mention of the poor is now seen as ideological. Barbara Wendland reports that recently church newsletters have begun to announce that members who pledge several thousand dollars will be given the title “Centurions,” a title that signifies “the exemplary model of honorable and courageous

⁶⁹ Scott J. Jones, e-mail sent to 120 Bishops of the United Methodist Church in January 2007. For a report see: <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=1wL4KnN1LtH&b=2429867&ct=3456005>

leadership. This leadership enabled the Roman Army to achieve what many believed to be impossible.”⁷⁰ When we can no longer even mention the margins of the Empire (the poor) and when the Roman Empire serves once again as a role model even for the church, theologians will need to take a closer look.

Could it be that the postcolonial empire is rewriting the old story of the Emperor’s New Clothes by Hans Christian Andersen? Where in the old story the child exposed the emperor’s lack of clothes, in the new story someone might contradict the child and insist that the emperor is indeed fully dressed and that children ought not to be allowed to comment on things that they do not understand. Then the grateful public, thus saved from embarrassment, would be assured that enhanced testing methods in the schools will henceforth make sure that such childish ambivalence—another form of ambivalence from below and a possible source of theological surpluses—will be corrected once and for all.

Where is the theological surplus in this situation? There is plenty of resistance, although this is frequently not reported in the official channels. For the past couple of years, I have come to know a substantial number of people who are on the verge of leaving or have left the United Methodist church (both in the U.S. and in Europe), not because they have lost faith but because they have a sense that the church trivializes the Christian faith and that it has given up the search for any theological surplus that pushes beyond the confines status quo (whether defined by Bush or Clinton). There is a growing level of the kind of ambivalence from below that challenges both the self-confidence of the empire and the cozy middle road. Unfortunately, this is often mistaken for a lack of faith or of commitment. Yet in a situation where notions like God’s omnipotence or the

⁷⁰ Barbara Wendland, *Connections* 178 (August 2007), 1.

lordship of Christ are used to shore up the status quo of the empire, any effort to question leads to a deeper sense of divine reality that is not available to those who simply repeat mindlessly. The challenge here is to put this sort of ambivalence to productive use and to rethink the Christian heritage in constructive fashion, understanding how our theological traditions have been shaped by empire (consciously and unconsciously), and how we can we develop a sense for their “theological surplus.”⁷¹

Conclusions

Recently a flier announcing a lecture promised to examine the question “whether the received gospel was the interposition of Roman governmental authorities.” It is fairly safe to assume that not even the Roman governmental authorities mustered enough power to define the religion of the people. Under the conditions of postcolonial empire it is even less the case that government officials tell the churches exactly what to believe. But this is hardly necessary, now less than ever. The powers of empire are diffuse and work best under ground, at the level of the subconscious. When the empire shapes our logic, no one needs to tell us what a “lord” is, what to understand by “love” and “justice,” and how to interpret God’s “omnipotence”; the theological success of empire is assured.

The question is whether there is still a chance of religion not going “from the greatest to the least” (Wesley). Can God yet surprise us and push us beyond the (theological) logic of the empire or the confines of the ecclesial middle road? Is

⁷¹ This is the project of my book *Christ and Empire*, where I seek to reclaim Paul’s notion of the lordship of Christ, the insistence of Christ’s full divinity and humanity as developed in the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, Anselm’s notion of the God-human, Las Casas’ notion of the Way of Christ, Schleiermacher’s appropriation of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, Aulén’s *Christus Victor*, and Matthew Fox’s Cosmic Christ.

ambivalence able to point us to transcendence—not the ethereal kind but the kind that transcends the status quo? Is there a reality that is not determined by top-down power? Can religion go the other way around?