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## *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*

*M. Douglas Meeks*

The theme of the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies was not chosen lightly or even willingly. After all, with the exception of the two articles and the one preposition, every word is problematic: "Future," "Methodist," "Theological," "Traditions." These words have become questions to us. But it is good that we begin by acknowledging the questions before us because questions always last longer than answers and in some ways are more important.

It is, to be sure, disingenuous to ask questions that one cannot answer. But no theologian can control forever the questions he or she must deal with. Sooner or later, the questions of children make their way into our working context in such a way that we cannot elude them. The questions of children and of what the New Testament calls the *mikroi*, the little ones, "the least of these my brothers and sisters," are, of course, mostly unanswerable, at least in any theoretical way, for they ask questions about suffering and joy, dying and new birth, which no theoretician has ever adequately treated. It may be that here at the beginning we should raise some questions that we could not possibly answer in this fortnight. But to state the matter positively, all communities come into being through common suffering over common questions. And our common suffering, and thus our community, is likely to be shaped, at least in the first instance, around these questions: "Future," "Methodist," "Theological," and "Traditions." If we had pondered for years, we would not have been able to come up with more obdurate proposals for study. Why, then, this theme?

The most direct answer is that it has been forced upon us by the present historical situations of our beloved Methodist and Wesleyan churches. The last Oxford Institute made this theme especially urgent and unavoidable. The Sixth Institute, focusing on the relationship between "liberation" and "sanctification," tried to bring the present state of Methodist theology into a creative confrontation with liberation theologies.<sup>1</sup> Can Methodist theology contribute anything to Christian mission in the worldwide situations of injustice and oppression? If it can, what does this mean for the mission of the Methodist churches in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres? If it cannot, where does this leave Methodism? Hopelessly locked into the cultural forms and institutions of the North Atlantic community? Inevitably suffering the fate of North America and Europe, armed to the teeth as they are with horrendously destructive weapons, but increasingly impotent to envision a way for the world to survive the intensifying conflicts of injustice? Could the Methodist/Wesleyan churches make some actual contribution to the conversion of West and East, to the radical transformation of the Northern Hemisphere societies so that the world might live? These were the questions on our minds in 1977.

Behind these questions was serious wrestling with the Halévy-Thompson debates about whether eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Methodism was a positive force in bringing societal change toward justice without the abhorrent disruptions of the French Revolution or a negative force of psychological and reformist amelioration preventing the needed radical structural change in the British and American societies.<sup>2</sup> The Institute sought to bring these debates up to our time and to ask the same questions about the Methodism we are living.

The thesis, the main contention, the wager of the Sixth Institute was that the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification is indeed transformationist and can relate faithfully and effectively to the radical change which the "global village" must live through in the next decades in order to survive. Theodore Runyon summarized the positive thrust in this fashion:

When Wesley is approached from the vantage point of liberation theologies, and especially from the perspective of the Marxist critique, his theology not only can be freed from the confines of pietistic individualism, it can counteract that individualism and offer resources for the responsible rethinking of theology in a time when both neo-Reformation and liberal models no longer suffice. . . . Only a theology that is transformationist can do justice to the Christian doctrine of sanctification and to the quality of salvation which that doctrine seeks to express.<sup>3</sup>

It was argued that Wesley's understanding of *faith lived in love toward holiness* was intimately connected with what liberation theologies speak of as praxis, radical spirituality, and identification with the poor.

But there were serious questions raised about that contention. Argentine theologian José Míguez Bonino maintained: "The fact that Methodism was unable to disclose for them the reality of their condition as a class, but rather led them to accept their role in society and to improve their lot without challenging the rules of the game, was one element of the domestication of the working class in Britain."<sup>4</sup>

Third World theologians pressed very hard the project of speaking about a future of Methodism among the oppressed in the Southern Hemisphere.

For us in the third world at least, Methodism as a social force is part of history—and in some ways part of the history of our domination and exploitation. The future belongs, under God, to the people—whether Methodist or Reformed or Catholic. . . . Whatever symbols, ideas, and representations will lead them in their struggle for liberation cannot be brought from outside (least of all from a foreign history), but must be begotten in the womb of the oppressed peoples.<sup>5</sup>

Wesley, it was claimed, was unable to see "the structural nature" of the social problem. Wesley's "holiness was social in the narrow sense that it related to personal relations with other people, especially those in the fellowship of believers."<sup>6</sup> As an eighteenth-century British High Church Tory gentleman, Wesley remained within the mercantilist system of thought. He believed in the *ancient régime*, the divine order, in which monarchy offered the greatest amount of liberty. If

human beings were politically free to become sanctified, no further structural change seemed necessary.<sup>7</sup> Wesley's anthropology seemed incurably individualistic.<sup>8</sup>

John Kent summed it up rather pointedly:

Holiness—far from being the definable state of consciousness Wesley took it to be . . . is a constant improvisation of charity out of ignorance and against the conditioning odds. Here, liberation, understood as the kind of self-awareness that is central to both black theology and feminist theology, seems to be a more hopeful guide than are scholastic revivals of sixteenth-to-eighteenth century doctrines of sanctification.<sup>9</sup>

And so went the debate that has brought us thus far. The questions are acute and too conspicuous to be ignored: Are the Methodist traditions really fruitful enough to play a role in the liberation of the oppressed? Is Methodism as we have known it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries already to be consigned to the dust bin of history? Do the Methodist theological traditions really have a future?

Do these questions represent only talismanic slogans, which themselves are evanescent? Are they fair questions? They go to the extreme in asking about the *relevance* of Methodism for the future, but do they not at the same time throw us into a deep *identity crisis*?

What is it about Methodists that makes us willing to deprecate and cashier our traditions? Do we prefer to gain our identity simply from the present actuality of our churches? Are there dangerous memories in the Methodist traditions that we want to keep from surfacing? I mean "dangerous" in the sense that if these memories were to become in any way authorizing for us, we ourselves and our life situations would have to change radically. Is it, for example, a dangerous memory that our origin is not as a church, but rather as an order, a society, a movement for the reformation of the church and the evangelization and transformation of the world? Does that memory make us unbearably uncomfortable about our denominationalism? Has the present actuality of denominationalism become the criterion of truth for us, so much so that our tradition has to be officially eclipsed? Are the memories of Wesley's solidarity

with the poor and of his peculiar configuration of theology, which left no easy rapprochement with the established theologies—are these memories also too dangerous for our place in the total mix of world church and world community?

Why Methodist? Why be a Methodist? This is one of those children's questions that goes embarrassingly to the very heart of the matter. Sometimes I have the childlike daydream that the several million persons around the globe who call themselves after the name and legacy of John Wesley could be brought together in one place. If I had only a minute to address this body, I would ask a series of questions. *Why has the Lord put you here as Methodists? What is the reason for your being Methodists? What in actual fact do you have to contribute to the church universal? What distinctive contributions are you making to God's work to redeem the world? What are you doing for the future of the world? Whose interests do you serve?*

This scene is only an alluring chimera, but unless we can answer these questions in good faith, even though our answers will be limited by our place in history, Methodism surely will fade in terms of significance for the future. It does not much help to say that the other mainline Protestant denominations are in the same boat. Do we want to be Methodists? Are we going to remain Methodists? If we do and we are, then we have to get to work at the critical appropriation and practice of the Methodist traditions. That is what this Institute is about. To use the old Southern *bon mot*, it is time "to paint or get off the ladder."

### *John Wesley: "Methodist" Authority?*

Let us turn first to the problematic theme "Methodist." To raise the question about Methodism is inevitably to raise the question about John Wesley. Is it not the case that those of us who will continue to call ourselves Methodist inexorably have a relationship to John Wesley? Is there anything still living in his life and thought for a faithful future of Christian mission in the world? With these questions in mind the call of this Institute has put as its initial task the critical remembrance of Wesley. For Methodist churches generally, Wesley lies buried under many decades of cult worship, ideological

misuse, selective memory, and self-serving of the churches claiming his legacy. By and large, we do not even know what questions or how to ask of Wesley, much less what questions Wesley should ask of us. We have a desultory relationship with Mr. Wesley. We have discovered that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century receptions of Wesley embarrass us and, worse, mislead us. Much work needs to be done on the nineteenth century to ascertain the historical processes in Britain and the United States that gave rise to the standard views of Wesley. This work might be a candidate for a future Institute. But in light of the last Institute, we have discovered the extreme urgency of getting in touch with John Wesley himself on a broad new footing.

The fate of Methodism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should not determine our reading of Wesley. Nor should the hidden assumptions of our own methods. To explain the captivity of the Methodist traditions to economic interests and structures is important, but by itself it says absolutely nothing about how persons are to gain the freedom, interest, and power to change conditions in our present situation. Economic and social analysis that masquerades as theology and proceeds without the question of how persons actually are to be converted in their interests and values also contains a reactionary element and in the end serves a despairing counsel of doom.

Is it all that useful to criticize Wesley for not giving a Marxist critique of society or for not being a capitalist? Is it wise to read Wesley through post-Kantian epistemologies and philosophies of history? Is it pertinent to judge Wesley according to the standards of systematic theology since Schleiermacher or for that matter according to the Lutheran and Reformed Renaissance of our century? What intention do we have when we submit Wesley's thought and life to these methodological assumptions? Is it that we want to ask Wesley all the questions without giving him a chance to question us?

But are there other ways of reading Wesley? Should not Wesley be read in terms of his whole corpus? In terms of his time and place? And in view of the whole Christian tradition? This is the direction of the project that Albert Outler and

others have been urging for several years. "Place Wesley in his own times, on his own terms—with a critical historical perspective."<sup>10</sup> This programme has to do with work in the primary sources of the Methodist traditions in an ecumenical style and on behalf of an ecumenical theology. It assumes that Methodist theology is congenitally and constitutionally ecumenical. That is, Wesley's theology must be set within the whole tradition in order to be able to make its own peculiar contributions. It simply cannot function without the sacramental order and universal covenant of the larger church.

This endeavor amounts, it seems, to nothing short of Wesley's liberation from two centuries and more of Methodism—all for the sake of the faithful practice of Methodist and Wesleyan churches today. Of course, there are hermeneutical questions involved in this historiographical program. It derives its hermeneutical questions from the whole tradition, including East and West. The secret is then to read Wesley the way Wesley read the tradition. It is historiography in the service of uncovering Wesley's own hermeneutic. This follows the contemporary hermeneutical principle of "the mediation of the interpretation of meaning through a subject that is itself located within a context of traditioned meaning."<sup>11</sup> The result is that we can be freed from narrow hermeneutic of the triumphalistic Methodist churches, the holiness movements, liberalism, Reformation theology, neo-orthodoxy, the social gospel, and colonialistic missions—while maintaining the unique contributions each might have made. Any Methodist theologian doing church theology in the context of the Methodist and Wesleyan churches, I should think, would have to come to grips with these historiographical implications.

But what about what Ricoeur calls hermeneutic "on this side of the text?" Can we simply take over Wesley's hermeneutic lock, stock, and barrel? Which elements should be taken over and why? What do the present groanings of the Holy Spirit and the sufferings of these times require that we ask of the biblical and traditional texts beyond what Wesley asked? Could we in this Institute begin to commit ourselves to the patience and care for the historiographical work

necessary to encounter the real Wesley as well as to the hard work of relating Wesley's reading of the tradition to a hermeneutic that takes our solidarity in Jesus Christ with the poor as the key?

Behind the question of a new historiography and a new hermeneutic lies the more general question of Wesley's authority. By an old and widespread judgment, John Wesley does not seem to be a first-rank theologian in the mode of Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth. That judgment makes us as Methodists tend to look for Wesley's authority on other grounds. The standard notion of Wesley's authority is as founder of the Methodist churches and their offshoots. From this perspective we view Wesley as having laid the foundation stone in the eighteenth century. Great reverence can be accorded the founder, but because we can be very selective about what we remember from Wesley, invoking his name can mean not much more than sanctifying the present actuality of the church. The "Daddy," after all, would agree with anything his children would do in his name. Thinking in terms of modern historicism supports this view of authority because we are able to reduce anything we do not like about Wesley or anything that threatens our social and economic positioning to the vagaries of his eighteenth-century context. Thus, Wesley is nothing more than a faint echo whispered over the decades, while the church is free to fashion a hero figure as its immediate interests dictate.

Wesley can also be viewed as the legal founder of Methodist institutions. Authority lies in the testamentary definition, which has been fixed by the founder's intention and which determines the form of the institution's present administration. Of course, when Methodism passed over to America, it selected only parts of the "last will and testament." Wesley was seen as the founder of very successful religious movements and institutions that considered themselves the continuing action of Wesley's will. But the more the church is viewed as the continuation of Wesley's will, the more the present legal administration of this will in the church determines who the founder should and can be. The church celebrates "founders' day" but does not fully take

seriously a conversation with Wesley. And over the long haul there is the suspicion, as evidenced with a vengeance in our time, of the continuing ineffective will of the founder. The result is increasing frustration.

Wesley is also sometimes viewed from a third perspective as the prototype of faith. Wesley made it possible for us to believe. There is something to this. There is something about the power of Wesley's faith as it relates to the miracle of our own faith. But there is also something highly dangerous about viewing Wesley as the origin and model of faith. And, of course, the danger is the proximity to idolatry.

In the fourth place, Wesley's authority can be seen to lie in his "holy living." He is our elder brother whose example we should follow. God occasionally gives God's people such persons whose lives embody the Pauline exhortation: "live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" and invite us, "Do as I do." This is not to say that ugly aspects of Wesley's life cannot be found for the looking. He was in some senses immature, boastful, authoritarian, and a compulsive neurotic.<sup>12</sup> But we cannot deny our fascination with certain ascetic and aesthetic dimensions of Wesley's life. Viewing the wholeness of Wesley's life as authority, however, would create by itself nothing but a personality cult.

A better way to view Wesley as our authority is as our teacher of the critical appropriation and practice of the tradition. What I wish to maintain is that Wesley's way of receiving and practicing the tradition is *his authorizing* of our peculiar Methodist/Wesleyan contribution to the ecumenical church and to the praxis of the Christian faith in the world today. Furthermore, Wesley's way of critically practicing the tradition is helpful with our struggle today over the nature and task of theology.

### "Theological"

It is no news to anyone today that theology is in trouble. Some are saying that theology as the project set in motion by Thomas Aquinas is coming to an end. What will take its place? Does world Methodism even need such a creature as a *theological* institute? If our project is not to suffer abortion at its

very conception, we shall have to inquire whether Wesley suggests alternative ways of understanding the nature and function of theology. Does he propose a way of viewing theology as "sound teaching" for the faithful praxis of the church? We can safely say that Wesley was neither a denominationalist nor a university theologian. He was a strategist for the renewal of the church and the evangelization of society. He had a strange relationship to the national church, never wanting to separate from its ministry and sacramental framework, but yet never becoming a theologian for the administration of the "multitudinous," the mass church. University-trained in the broad humanist disciplines of philology, rhetoric, and logic, as most of us are, Wesley nevertheless was among the poor and studied communication with them in ways that some liberation theologians are only theorizing about. He did not separate biblical and doctrinal theology from the local class meeting. Despite all the obvious criticisms, which can be lodged against Wesley by liberation theologians, might it not be the case that his is after all a preeminent example of praxis theology?

For all his too facile acceptance of certain universal philosophical concepts of the eighteenth century, Wesley for the most part did not trade in the inexplicability of these great placative concepts to justify their explanatory value and thereby to cover up every conceivable contradiction in thought and society. Rather he viewed theology as a process of concrete critique of and real liberation from the godless ties in society. He did not settle for theology as a mere integration or synthesis of different positions, confessions, or cultures. He cannot be attached to a school nor did he found one. A folk theologian with no academic base, he developed no metaphysical theories. He did not have an epistemological method elaborated in advance of the first things which must be said about the gospel. He worked out no great system that lusts after the unity of being, thought, society, and church by excluding the negatives of social existence or by eclipsing the only power which can bring about unity, namely, suffering love.

Wesley is a valuable dialogue partner just at this time when we are again confronted with attempts to make theology into

a *Wissenschaftstheorie* in order to justify the place of theology in the university. Theology oriented to world views and pursued as a universal science is again coming into vogue. In Europe and the United States there is a search for "the integrating meta-theological unity of theory itself," which, in my view, threatens to make theology utterly illusory. In this project the theologian overlooks his or her own conditions of existence in reference to the universal whole with the result that his or her own conditions are imperiously generalized as the unifying theory. Thus traditionally mediated authority is simply replaced by a new kind of subtle imperialism and totalitarianism in theology. Such theology finds it increasingly difficult to identify anything as peculiarly Christian because Christianity (in its European-North American expression) is itself viewed as the unifying theory of the West. Because for Wesley, theology is oriented to the gospel for sinners and the poor, he can authorize our struggle against the loss of the gospel's uniqueness in the dominating techniques of abstraction.

### "Traditions"

In the context of the World Methodist Council we are faced with the reality of plural traditions, which name themselves after Wesley and the original Methodist movements. We increasingly sense the embarrassment that often there has been more dialogue between the various Methodist/Wesleyan traditions and other confessional traditions than among the Methodist/Wesleyan traditions themselves. But it is not only the plurality of our traditions that we have to face honestly but also the very notion of tradition itself. So deflated is the notion of tradition that in our amnesia and anesthesia our intention of considering the future of Methodist traditions could be immediately declared vain. Thus our conversation with Wesley and the Methodist traditions inevitably will take place in full acknowledgment of the crisis of tradition itself. The future of the Methodist theological traditions depends at least initially on our deciding whether the church's theological existence needs tradition. Without tradition theology has no *theological* given. And unless we want to contend that

faith creates faith or that theological judgments fund themselves, we must be able to say how tradition is the necessary matrix and a valid criterion of theology.

The crisis of tradition in the church, as Edward Farley has shown recently, has been brought on by the fact that the "house of authority," which the early church built as its methodological home, has collapsed in the modern world.<sup>14</sup> The collapse of this house has been caused by suffering from evil and oppression, whether in the economic, political, cultural, natural, or personal dimensions of modern life. That is, the theodicy question has dismantled the traditional method and content of theology.

The "house of authority" was built on the "monarchical metaphor of God's relation to the world" and was expressed in the "logic of triumphalism."<sup>15</sup> The interconnection of the ancient Christian doctrine of God with Greek metaphysical notions of being based on political rule was demonstrated several decades ago by Erik Peterson.<sup>16</sup> By and large the power of God has been thought traditionally on the model of imperialism. Agamemnon's statement in preparation for the Trojan war, "Let there be one ruler only," was the background for the metaphysical and later theological connection between monotheism and monarchy. All the attributes of being itself were given to God in Christian theology: one, simple, undivided, immutable, infinite, immortal, self-sufficient, and impassible. These are the attributes one needs in order to control, to dominate, to rule an empire. Stoicism and many other traditions of political philosophy shifted these attributes in their immanent form to the anthropological sphere. Today these attributes are lusted after by the *homo Americanus* or the *homo Sovieticus* as the means of domination.

The imperial metaphor of God's relation to the world leads to one of two alternatives: Either God can but does not will to redeem creation from evil or God can and does determine everything in creation and thus is the cause of evil. Both assumptions are exploded by the theodicy question in its modern forms because both assumptions deny divine goodness and creaturely freedom. When heteronomous divine causality is denied, however, so is the notion of

identity between divine and human acts, an assumption that grounds the classical conception of the authority of scripture, dogma, the magisterium, and tradition.<sup>17</sup>

We are then left with the products of the historian's or the sociologist's work but not with the "faith once received." Thus we get the modern and contemporary theological attempts to replace tradition with the historical study of Christianity or with phenomenology, with sociological analysis or ideology.

Could Wesley suggest to us some alternative dimensions of appropriating the tradition beyond the citation of authority based on divine causality and beyond the substitution of phenomenology or sociology? For Wesley the given matrix of theology was not dogma or feeling or experience or social analysis. It was the reality of the redemptive existence created by the grace of God—preventing, justifying, and sanctifying.<sup>18</sup> This was what we might call Wesley's "portraiture" of the tradition, his way of reading, comprehending, and appropriating the tradition. Wesley's writings are full of the classical genre of citation and explication of authorities, which belongs to the "house of authority." But there is also another genre at work, which we might refer to as inquiry into the tradition out of the experienced reality of the lived redemptive history. I believe we can see in Wesley the essentially catholic view that the cognitive (remembering, reflecting) dimensions of faith are founded in the corporate existence of the being-redeemed people. Tradition is an agency of the authorization (creation) of the faithful community. It is in this field that tradition comes alive. This is the context in which the *paradosis* is sought after and yearned for as is the last family member to come home at night.

Perhaps even more fruitful would be a careful investigation of the similarities between what liberation theology calls "praxis" and Wesley's relationship to faith's originative events.

How does the practice of tradition contribute to the authorization of the community? It has often been maintained that Wesley subjectivizes and privatizes the inheritance of tradition. That is not true. For Wesley, neither the content of the gospel, the narrative of Jesus Christ, nor the

delivering of the gospel is subjectivized. They are objective and objectively transforming events. It is true that the evidence by which they become assured by faith seems to be for Wesley internal to the soul. But the redeeming efficacy of Jesus Christ is historically real. The "cumulative narrative bond" is found in the life and action of the person being justified and sanctified. "The crucial and indispensable continuity or linkage in the story is the journeying of the Christian person from sin through justification to sanctification. . . ." <sup>19</sup> God's gracious righteousness in Jesus is remembered and "storied" in the action of the believer. The redeemer is also the creator of the Christian's journey "for this is the narrative framework, the meaningful pattern within which alone the occurrence of the cross finds its applicative sense. What is real, and what therefore the Christian really lives, is his own pilgrimage: and to its pattern he looks for the assurance that he is really living it." <sup>20</sup>

Contemporary praxis theology speaks of the critical practice of the tradition in a similar way, except it views the righteousness/justice of God as evidence for sanctification and assurance in a much broader social, political, and economic framework. To be justified and sanctified means to become part of the history of God through the world which we see and enter into through Jesus Christ. The plot-line of the story is fixed in the cross of Jesus Christ in which we see the embodied power, freedom, and justice of God. The life of going on to maturity is the life of entering into this power, freedom, and justice by means of the gracious empowering of God the Holy Spirit.

### *The "Future": Power, Freedom, and Justice*

We have considered the problematics "Methodist," "Theological," and "Traditions." It remains to confront the "Future." The Methodist traditions must contribute to our hope in the future in the face of increasing despair about the future, or our task of preparing for the future of the Methodist traditions will have no ground. Methodist traditions, like all other traditions, face the seemingly universal threat to the human future.

The future is radically questioned by a widespread sense of scarcity, on the one hand, and of satiety, at least in the developed countries, on the other hand. Both the fear of scarcity, a future not realizable, and the experience of satiety, the numbness of a future thought pretentiously to be already realized, yield a new atmosphere of insecurity. And thus as never before the future questions the Methodist theological traditions about the kind of power, freedom, and justice that can promise a future for the world.

The future confronts the tradition with this question: "Will our own power destroy us?" For the first time in history Christians are commanded to preach the gospel in a time in which the whole human race could commit suicide. The bomb, "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be" (Mark 13:14), has become the ultimate symbol of human power. It is the symbol of the power of human techné to dominate the earth and control history. The proof is in the human power to put an end to the earth. But the symbol of our greatest power is also the symbol of our greatest impotence. It is the reality of our sin's recoil. We human beings, held Wesley in agreement with Augustine, are created to be able freely to love God infinitely. The reality of original sin is that we love ourselves and our accomplishments infinitely. <sup>21</sup> Only this capacity for misplacing our love of God onto an infinite love of and trust in our weapons can explain the fact that the human being, a creature, could destroy the whole earth.

The bomb epitomizes the danger of this new age in which power will have to be radically transformed if we are going to survive and contribute to the future of God's creation. The existence of the power that can bring universal death to the world requires that the "age of empire" be brought to an end. It is becoming plain that we cannot continue trying to form life around the traditional conceptions of imperial power without suffering the suicidal adjudications of imperial conflicts. If it is clear that imperialistic conceptions of power must come to an end, do we not have to think of God in nonimperialistic ways and worship and love God with our lives in nonimperialistic ways? Will not the future of Methodist theological traditions depend on their fructification



of these attempts to worship, serve, and trust God in ways more consistent with God's character as seen in the crucified Jesus?

The basic question is how God's power is to be defined. Wesley perceived God in the passion of Christ and the passion of Christ in God. To be sure, he spoke in the traditional language of the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. But are there not many clues in Wesley for a transvaluation of God's sovereignty into nonimperialistic modes? For Wesley the power of God for redemption, for the new creation of human beings in the world, is God's power of self-giving.<sup>22</sup> Is it not the case that Wesley's view of the love of God as the power of the cross, the power of God's suffering love *pro nobis*, was the single most important element in the Methodist revival?

Justifying and sanctifying grace are not the action of an emperor who owns and rules the world by fiat, but the work, the grief, the suffering, the joy of the God who gives God's life away for the world. This is the God whose actions are preceded by passions. This is the God who does not coerce but invites with promises of joy in suffering; who does not glory in self-sufficiency but who suffers for our own transformation and that of the world so that we may be in God's presence of glory.

The future also questions the Methodist traditions about freedom. In the developed world, freedom and authority have been at odds at least since the Enlightenment. Reflecting the ancient theological tension between sovereignty and agency, we vascillate between *paternalism* and *autonomy*. The conflict between these two conceptions of freedom in the Northern Hemisphere in large measure contributes to the structures in which oppressed people are forced to live around the world.

Over the last several decades what Michael Walzer calls "liberal liberation" has increasingly influenced the major institutions of our societies. Liberal liberation has meant breaking all constraints on individuals due to religion, race, sex, and social ties. But the effect of this liberation without radical changes in the modern liberal ideology of progress, growth, and increase has led to the well-known "individualism

with a vengeance." The autonomous individual of bourgeois moral philosophy is set loose idiosyncratically to live a life of "abolished prohibitions," as long as he or she is in search of *private satisfaction*. Freedom is identified with breaking the spell of authority. It leads to "idiocy" in the classical sense, where the "idiot" is the isolated individual.<sup>23</sup> The result of such freedom is best described by C. B. MacPherson's phrase "possessive individualism."<sup>24</sup> And the forms of autonomous authority are just as pernicious and dehumanizing as those of paternalism!

Neoconservatives, on the other hand, try to refurbish paternalistic notions of authority and property necessary to the maintenance of prevailing systems of planning and investment in the corporate economy. They think that the ideology of growth and progress is threatened by what liberal autonomy has done to traditional family and sexual life, hard work, individual freedom, and so on. Neoconservatives direct their venom against contemporary "liberal liberation," which to their minds has led to increased freedom from legal and social constraint and thus to "liberal decadence," instant gratification in a world of graceless hedonists. (And one doesn't have to be a member of the "moral majority" to appreciate their point about excesses in liberation to private satisfaction.) Both "liberal liberationist" forms of autonomous authority and neoconservatist forms of paternalistic authority depend on notions of freedom that come out of the depth ideology of growth, increase, and domination through knowledge and technology, the ideology at the heart of all existing capitalist as well as socialist societies. What neither authority as autonomy nor authority as paternalism criticizes is the notion of freedom as the control of property, work, and consumption. Are there hints of a humanizing freedom beyond paternalism and autonomy in the Wesleyan tradition?

Wesley's theology of the divine compassion redefines the nature of God's freedom and of human freedom. God's freedom has traditionally been interpreted as absolute free choice, based on God's perfect, beatific self-sufficiency within the closed life of the immanent Trinity and on God's *apatheia*, inability to suffer. God's sovereign freedom meant God's groundless decision or decree, on which everything

else, including God's love, was based. The view of freedom as absolute free choice has its philosophical origins in the absolute power of disposing property found in Roman law (and modernized by John Locke). Freedom then means ability to control property and people.

Wesley's theology, then, makes a radical departure from this concept of freedom.<sup>25</sup> For Wesley, God's freedom is grounded in God's love. And here is an important difference from the Calvinist tradition. To put a point on it: The notion of God's lordly freedom as "free choice" denies God's nature as love. But because God cannot deny Godself, God does not have the choice between mutually exclusive possibilities: being love or not being love. "If God is love, then in loving the world he is entirely free because he is entirely himself. If he is the highest good, then his liberty cannot consist of having to choose between good and evil. On the contrary, it lies in doing the good which he himself is, which means communicating himself."<sup>26</sup> Thus a concept of freedom, which would be appropriate to God, cannot be derived from the language of domination. Wesley did not search the tradition for concepts of freedom that describe laws applying to property, but rather for the language of freedom that describes personal and communal relationships, fellowship, and friendship. It is for this reason that Wesley has trouble with *laissez faire* notions of freedom in relation to work, property, and consumption.

If God's eternal freedom is God's love, suffering, patience, and self-giving, then this determines the quality of the synergistic relationship with the believer. Preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace create a new human being with freedom to enter into God's history of redeeming righteousness with the world. The freedom of the will is not yet the freedom of the gospel. Justifying grace turns freedom under good and evil into conversion of the believer's being, into liberation from guilt, liberation from the fear of death, from self-possession, from idols, from personality cults, from our compulsion to dominate our environment, and from our dependence on necrophiliac security systems. Only persons thus freed can do God's justice. Liberation theology, at least in the North American context, is nothing but a new

moralism if it does not treat how the gospel's justifying grace can liberate us from sin.

Finally, the future questions the Methodist theological traditions about justice. What contribution can these traditions make to the deadly worldwide struggle over the meaning of justice? Here the greatest challenge facing the critical appropriation of the Methodist traditions is still, as Wesley himself claimed, demonstrating the reality of sanctifying grace to the ecumene.<sup>27</sup> Reading the tradition with Wesley on this side of the biblical and Wesleyan texts, we should say that sanctification is the practice of God's justice through the power of God's righteousness given by the Holy Spirit. It leads to a life of correspondence with Christ. It makes of Christians artisans of a new humanity with their own lives serving as the material.

The doctrine of sanctification has a future insofar as we allow its biblical heart, God's justice for the world, to be taught and practiced. The logic of Jesus' understanding of the grace of God's justice cannot be assimilated to justice as equality, equity, desert for effort, for accomplishment, or for usefulness to society. These are the prevailing concepts of justice in our societies based on the ideology of scarcity, the presupposition that there is not enough to go around. The logic of Jesus is the "how much more," the "more than enough," the abundance and superabundance and the "second mile" of God's grace. Indeed the New Testament witnesses that God the Holy Spirit obliterates the ideology of scarcity, on which the prevailing concepts of justice in our societies are based.<sup>28</sup> The Holy Spirit obliterates scarcity by providing enough, more than enough, wherever God's righteousness reigns in the lives of those who are choosing the life of the gospel. Sanctifying grace makes it possible to do God's justice in the sharing of the rights of life. Sanctifying grace works by offering every human being the rights of home, the rights, as Wesley so often loved to say, of being a child of God, the rights of the inheritance of what it takes to be truly human. The process of grace in Jesus Christ gives us the rights of an obedient slave, then of a beloved child, and finally of a respected friend.

The third great revival for which Methodists, I should think, are constitutionally required to be looking, will be

qualitatively different from the first two because sanctifying grace in our time will have to be connected with economic and social structures in a way never dreamed of by the generations before us. But should we not admit that there will be no significant reformation of the church for the transformation of the world without sanctifying grace? If so, we are on the way to the future of the Methodist theological traditions.

### Notes

1. The papers of the Sixth Oxford Institute are published in *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981).
2. See Elie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
3. Theodore Runyon, "Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, pp. 47-48.
4. José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, p. 59.
5. Míguez Bonino, p. 60.
6. Rupert E. Davies, "Justification, Sanctification, and the Liberation of the Person," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, p. 80.
7. Davies, p. 89.
8. The Third World analysis continued with an examination of the patterns of evangelism employed in the early days of Methodist missions in Ghana. See Kwesi A. Dickson, "The Methodist Witness and the African Situation," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, pp. 193-206. Pinpointed was the tendency to link the Christian message of the new life to the necessity that the converts separate themselves from their traditional life. Contributions from Black and feminist theologians pointed to Methodism's tendency to isolate the experience of holiness from the "spiritual empowerment to change the existing social arrangements." See James H. Cone, "Sanctification and Liberation in the Black Religious Tradition," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, pp. 188-89; see also Nancy A. Hardesty, "The Wesleyan Movement and Women's Liberation," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, pp. 164-73.
9. John Kent, "Methodism and Social Change in Britain," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, pp. 100-101.
10. See Albert C. Outler, "The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976), pp. 11-38; see also "Methodism's Theological Heritage: A Study in Perspective," in *Methodism's Destiny in an Ecumenical Age*, ed. Paul M. Minus, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), pp. 44-70; "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964); "Toward a Re-Appraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian," *Perkins Journal* (Winter, 1961), pp. 5-14; "Introduction," *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York

- Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 3-33; *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975).
11. Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 216.
  12. See Robert L. Moore, *John Wesley and Authority: A Psychological Perspective* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1979).
  13. J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978) for a criticism of contemporary theology's captivity to the notion of the "mass church."
  14. Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
  15. Farley, pp. 154ff.
  16. Eric Peterson, "Monotheismus als politisches Problem," in *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1951).
  17. Farley, pp. 157ff.
  18. Outler, *John Wesley*, pp. 167-72, 272ff., 365ff.
  19. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 153.
  20. Frei, pp. 153-54.
  21. *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, IX, p. 456.
  22. *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, annotated by Edward H. Sugden (London: Epworth Press, 1956), I, p. 121. Cf. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), p. 835.
  23. John R. Wikse, *About Possession: The Self as Private Property* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).
  24. See C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).
  25. See Outler, *John Wesley*, pp. 425-91, especially pp. 478ff. In his excellent essay, "Human Liberty as Divine Right: A Study in the Political Maturation of John Wesley," Leon O. Hynson argues that regarding authority, freedom, and rights, "the issue at rock bottom is Wesley's theological persuasion that God is the fount of authority" (p. 18). The nature of God's authority and power (as love) is the constant principle in the maturation of Wesley's thought on rights and freedom. "The evidence disclosed from a careful reading of Wesley suggests that he moved from an early emphasis on 'divine, indefeasible, hereditary rights' of the monarchy to an emphasis on the divine right of human rights. His dedication to the monarchy is real, but becomes in his mature years the political instrument of his profound effort to preserve liberty for the people and the nation" (p. 28). In the process of this maturation in his political thought Wesley had to rethink the American Revolution, for example, in his letter to "Our Brethren in America." It may be that in terms of what is happening in God's authorizing of rights and freedom today, Northern Hemisphere Methodists will have to rethink some "revolutions" in our own time.
  26. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 54-55.
  27. "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up." *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), VIII, p. 238.
  28. Cf. M. Douglas Meeks, "The Holy Spirit and Human Needs: Toward a Trinitarian View of Economics," *Christianity and Crisis*, 40 (Nov. 10, 1980).