

Chapter 10

REFLECTIONS AND OPEN TASKS

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Not many in the Institute, I surmise, know about my former career as a ballet dancer. As you have seen me walk gracefully across the quad, perhaps you have detected something of my glory days when I danced a *pas de deux* with Dame Margot Fonteyn. But, alas, I can see by your incredulous visage that I am not going to be able to fool you with my wishful thinking.

It might indeed have been wishful thinking when we convened in Oxford a fortnight ago with the question whether there is or could be a consensus on what Methodists and Wesleyans throughout the world should teach (1) within the church's generation of the generations and (2) to the world. Could we find unity on the questions once posed by our predecessors in the faith: What to teach? How to teach? What to do? I think it safe to say that no one came with an overdose of sanguinity that there would be an overwhelmingly positive answer. But just because I have never been on a ballet stage does not mean I do not have a deep aspiration to dance. I believe that even those among us who came convinced that in principle no consensus could be found still aspire that we Methodists dance in a harmonious, if complicated, choreography. It is certain that all of us will leave with a renewed sense of the difficulties of the dance.

Not being practiced in the English art of understatement, I would nevertheless risk the observation that in this Institute we have been somewhat contentious. There has been a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion about "unity" and "consensus." We are suspicious about these words, for we know that they are political words. Masters, rulers, governors, politicians always want unity. In modern discourse about unity we have learned to ask almost reflexively, *Cui bono?* Unity for whose good? We may not have a positive consensus about what to teach, but we do have a strong shared sense of real and potential domination. We have been keen to remind each other of the various dominations that our particular histories and our particular social locations harbor. To say it positively, we are a people who do not want to be dominated and who are ready to struggle against domination as we see

it. The simple fact, however, is that we have not all suffered the same dominations.

We have spoken fairly often about being a Methodist “family.” But the family members do not want a quick consensus and an easy unity. Who will define the consensus? We have heard several different responses to that question. Certainly not the older and larger churches of the family who are perceived to have lost some of the distinctive aspects of the Wesleyan tradition and to have become lifeless, nonevangelical, too little concerned about personal conversion and sanctification. Certainly not the accommodated members of the family who are not aware of their social location and of the structural conditions of the world societies that make and maintain the poverty of the poor. Certainly not the forgetful members of the family who no longer struggle to remember Wesley and Wesley’s appropriation of the Tradition. And so our debate has moved: sometimes at a snail’s pace, quite often with consternation, occasionally with anger, but, in it all, as a family discussion around the *only* table which in these times is likely to keep the family together at all. At times we were not explicitly aware of what was keeping us in conversation except the sense that if we stopped talking we would betray ourselves. The final report must be: no earth shaking consensus, no false sense of unity on the question of Methodist doctrine. Gone is any sense of overwhelming theological self-confidence which led a theologian of the last generation to lecture, it is reported, in the following way: “Jesus said, and rightly so.” So there seems to be an ever so slight consensus: Methodist teaching should be freed from domination, beginning with the teachers.

And yet we know that something about our Methodist identity contributes to our eagerness for something more: “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We know that our peculiar Methodist memories proffer something crucial for us as we call upon the Spirit’s gifts for “building up the body of Christ until all can attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature personhood” (Eph. 4:3).

Looking at each other across the Lord’s Table, no one of us has been free from the burden of the questions, Will our children have faith? and, Will our faith have children? For better or for worse each of us has been burdened with specific responsibilities for the generation of the generations in the household of God. How can we pass on our faithing and hoping in a world that so convincingly contradicts our faith and hope? Do we have anything distinctively Methodist to say when our brothers and sisters in the oikumene ask us to testify in a world where truths are defined by the awesome power of the accumulation of wealth, of manipulable information and technology, and of weapons of unimaginable destructiveness? Will we

as Methodists answer at all when the world asks for alternatives to its dominative ways to justice and peace?

Perhaps we are too nervous about our Methodist family. My sense is that we have done best in those moments when we have been less concerned about one branch of Methodism dominating another and more focused on the world, which, as our Lord warned, hates us, and yet which God loves with God's whole being. In a few unguarded moments we have thought out God's passion for the world and have suddenly, faced with the seeming impossibilities of our mission to the world, surprised ourselves that perhaps we do need each other after all.

Would it be wrong to say that in our family what Wesley held together tenuously and at a modicum has fallen apart? We are most separated on the starting point or principal emphasis for teaching as Methodists. Risking oversimplification, I would say that the three primary starting points or emphases most represented in the Institute have been (1) tradition, (2) personal conversion, and (3) the experience of the poor. John Wesley held these together. No one would say perfectly, and yet we would all say that our fascination with Wesley has something to do with his mediation of all three. But our frustrations over our differences about how to put these three elements together are so great that some of us have wanted to desist from even saying the name Wesley for awhile.

Albert Outler's keynote was a mixture of sober realism about Methodist dissensus, on the one hand, and hopeful ways of working at consensus, on the other. As usual, Outler did not mince his words: the Lombard syndrome of Euroamerican theology is at an end. The great epistemological and technological dreams of Western progress are, if still terribly powerful, showing their impotency, except for destruction, and yet are so disturbing our slumber that we cannot yet dream the coming age. The more realistic we are about the bankruptcy of our accommodation to the modern Western traditions, the more the "modest share of doctrinal treasure" we bear from Wesley becomes crucial. This is a point one could have hoped to find more consensus on than we evidently did. If Methodism is to survive the turn of the century, we shall.

Professor Outler masterfully showed how our three questions—What to teach? How to teach? and What to do?—are interwoven with each other in Wesley's way of doing theology. It is certainly not an Outlerian way of putting it, but he almost said that in Wesley, God talk and God walk are inextricably connected. For Wesley, God talk is not abstract speculation on God's essence but rather living and walking in the Spirit. Theology as life in the Holy Spirit is an ordering of one's way of being in the world out of the energies of God's grace; it is "living toward the end of being fully

sacralized.” A perdurable *sensus fidelium* is created by God’s preventively present grace.

The criticism of theology as a speculative compend has been repeated many times in different ways the last ten days. We have almost reached a consensus: We are all wary of universals, but, again, for different reasons. John Walsh reminded us of Wesley’s saying, “I look upon all the world as my parish.” A member of one of the interdisciplinary groups related that as a youth growing up in a colonial context he learned of Wesley’s world parish while simultaneously learning by heart, “Rule, Britannia, Rule.” Bishop Tutu once remarked, “When the white missionaries came to Southern Africa, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible.” Whose universal are we talking about?

The Bible does not entertain very many universals. When it speaks in all-inclusive terms, it usually speaks in negations. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” That is a universal. But it is not a universal with which you can dominate anyone else. The Bible also claims universally that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has died for the whole world. That, too, is a universal, but it is a universal based on God’s suffering of death. It is not a universal with which you can dominate anyone else.

Is all the world our parish? Well, it depends on what we mean by “parish.” The word comes from *παρα-οικος* and originally means the one who lives beyond the household. *Πάροικοι* are strangers, the homeless. According to 1 Peter the *πάροικοι* are those who have been systematically excluded from the household: the household of Israel or the household of Caesar. The ancient word economy (*οἶκος + νόμος*) means the law or management of the household. Until the eighteenth century, economy had fundamentally to do with livelihood, with access to the household. To use economic language in connection with God and salvation has become strange to our ears because since Adam Smith, and especially since the most important American “theologian,” Andrew Carnegie, it has been construed a logical mistake to speak of God and economy together. But the biblical traditions are full of economy and of economic metaphors referring to God. The early church spoke of God’s history of righteousness with the creation as God’s “economy” and the Triune Community’s dealings with the world as the “economic” Trinity. The history of redemption is God’s attempt to make a home for all of creation and for all of God’s people. The “oik-paranymy” (economy, ecology and ecumene) are about household or home; they are about (1) whether people will find access to livelihood, (2) whether nature will find a home in which it can survive, (3) whether the peoples of the world will find the world mutually habitable in peace.

How should we define household and home? If we follow the biblical poetic images, (1) home is where everyone always knows your name, (2) home is where you can always expect to be confronted, forgiven, put under obligation, (3) home is where there is always a place for you at the table, and (4) home is where you can always count on what is on the table being shared. According to the biblical narratives, God has gone and will go to all lengths in order to create home for God's creatures. According to Philippians 2, this includes God's becoming the "Economist," a household slave (δοῦλος, the ancient meaning of "economist"), in order to create an open household. The meaning of "parish," then, would have been that Jesus Christ is present among the strangers, those who have been excluded from the household. The parish is present where God the Economist is present. Is the world our parish? The Western traditions of imperialism and domination have been glad to view the whole world as their parish. Caesar's household divided the whole world up into parishes, but parish no longer meant the strangers on the outside but those who were within the closed residential, economic, and political circles of a society. One implied question of this Institute has been whether John Wesley broke the hegemony of the Western "parish." John Walsh argued eloquently that Wesley's life in the Spirit made him at home with the poor, even to the point of contracting skin diseases from their beds and stomach disorders from their tables, and this not out of a derived social strategy but because God was at work among the poor building the household in which God will graciously give us all home. "Unless God builds the house our labor is in vain."

For some years now, Albert Outler has been pointing to Wesley's recovery of the Eastern early theologians. Some have remained reluctant for fear of journeying to the arcane. But to return with Wesley to the early theologians is to find a revolutionary view of economy which will quickly take us back to our origins in the household of Israel. It will remind us that our ancient memory of Yahweh begins, "Once we were slaves." There is nothing before that; anything that begins before this memory is nonhistorical, speculative, and ripe for ideological use. Once we were slaves in the household, the economy, of Pharaoh, and Yahweh graciously made a new household of freedom for us. Retrieving the theology of the early theologians thus means that we also retrieve critically their life in the economy of God and ask what implications that would have for our life in the economy of God. Clement, Chrysostom, Basil, Ambrose, and even Augustine will remind us again and again of the Torah, the new economy, the new household rules, the new economic life-style which God has graciously given us and which our Wesleyan understanding of justification will not allow us to set aside, however much the world we live in calls it folly. For starters we can refer to: charge no interest to the poor, return a cloak taken

in surety before the cold of the night sets in, leave a portion of your harvest and accumulated wealth so that no one will be shut out of the household and this not as a matter of voluntary charity but in recognition that God has given the poor a claim on what is necessary for livelihood and life abundant and if you do not give what is superfluous to our livelihood you are, *coram Deo*, a thief; resist making private what should not be made private, namely, that accumulation of wealth that gives individuals and organizations power to control the lives and future of others. In the free market societies of the West and the state market societies of the East, these Torah household rules are viewed as quaint and ludicrous, not to speak of dangerous. Because Wesley's life in the Spirit is full of these perspectives on God's economy, we devotees of modern economic instruments consider him silly. Unless, of course, we have some questions about the modern promises of salvation through economy.

Many third and fourth world, black, and feminist theologians in this Institute have risked being strident and recalcitrant because they are convinced that Methodist theology cannot start with tradition or personal internal experience but with the experience of those who have been structurally and systematically shut out of the household, denied access to what it takes to live and work, to have a name and story.

The developing debate of this Institute has shown that no one wants to jettison Wesley. I like the way Bishop Cannon said it, "We've got Wesley for better or worse, and we're going to keep him." But many here present want to retrieve Wesley *together* with a disciplined socio-economic analysis. Why are the poor in poverty? Why does an eight-year-old girl get shot dead by a stray bullet of the security forces in South Africa? Why must peasants in Brazil plant soybeans in their fields rather than black beans on which they have subsisted for decades and so make themselves increasingly dependent on Northern markets? Why did the United Nations Food Council meeting in Beijing recently report that despite a world awash in cheap surplus food, the number of hungry people in the world grew by 15 million from 460 million in 1970 to some 475 million in 1980, a rate of increase of 1.5 million per year? Why are Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in the rich household of the United States still systematically excluded from what it takes to live and work? What will happen to the world monetary system when it finally becomes evident that the enormous debt of the third world cannot be repaid without a horrendous repression of third-world peoples which not even the Trilateralists and International Monetary Fund have been able to dream up? Are the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and the Soviet Union even more dangerous now that the United States has become the largest debtor nation in the world and the Soviet Union is becoming increasingly competitive for markets? These are ques-

tions that some in the Institute are convinced that we have to work at precisely as we work at pneumatology, sanctification, and evangelization.

Three of our plenary lecturers, Mercy Oduyoye, José Míguez, and Adrian Hastings, dealt with the problem of the church's teaching within a so-called "pluralist" society. Each made profound criticisms of the Enlightenment pretensions of pluralism, another universalizing tendency. Mercy Oduyoye exposed the authoritarian patriarchal and paternalistic teaching in African church and society. She looks for a liberative teaching through communal participation and partnership and finds a model in the Eucharist. A teaching which does not participate in changing the life conditions of the oppressed contributes to their oppression. "For the poor and exploited the future does not include their present conditions; therefore no teaching will be authoritative which requires them to cooperate with such a present."¹ José Míguez questioned the liberal pluralism which prevents the church from engaging in a kind of teaching which takes sides in the conflicts of the public household when it is clear that the truth of the gospel is at stake. Adrian Hastings argued that our uncritical assumption of pluralism precludes our expressing and living the true scandal of Christian particularism in the cross. The manufacturing of a universal religion is simply another form of Western imperialism. To be sure, we need to understand the plural nature of our world and our churches, but perhaps it is time that we stop expecting the buzz word "pluralism" to solve any theological problem for us.

If I am right in detecting an ever so slight consensus about Methodist teaching in our agreement as Methodists to be suspicious about universals, then it could be that we all have to inch toward the necessity of socio-economic analysis as an aspect of our life in the Spirit. There are two pretensions to universality that are emerging from the first world and spreading with impressive momentum to all parts of the world.² The first is the universalist pretention that the whole world can be organized by the nature and logic of the market. We can probably all agree that there are many good things about the market. No country is without markets of some kind. The problem occurs when the peculiar logic of exchanging commodities is expanded to determine the distribution of social goods in all spheres of distribution.

If we stick with John Wesley we shall be reminded that Israel and the church have always known, when they can remember, that there are some things that cannot be distributed according to the logic of the market. We have always known that sex cannot be put into exchange relationships. "Bought sex is not the same."³ We have always known, when we could remember our starting point in slavery and God's gracious redemption from slavery, that you cannot put the relation of parents and children or

learning or healing into exchange relationships, else they be distorted. And we have always known that you cannot put even food, housing, and work exhaustively into exchange relationships without the result being that some are left out of the household, out of access to what it takes to live and work. Wesley did not engage in the kind of social analysis we have to do, but he did know and we need to learn from him that the logic of distributing the social goods that most count for life, belonging to a community, recognition, righteousness, and grace, comes nowhere but from the love of God.

The other pretention to universality is the neo-Hobbesian claim that in order to protect property rights we shall have to give up personal, civil, and human rights. In my country, the Iran-Contra hearings have uncovered various people who seem to be willing to sacrifice democracy for the sake of economic security. This universal claim is spreading frightfully fast all over the world and is producing a growing acceptance of the national security state.

If we are inching toward a still distant consensus on the cruciality of socio-economic analysis for our life in the Spirit, we should at the same time be inching toward a consensus that socio-economic analysis cannot bring God's redemption (any more so than theology). It is true that only life at table with the poor is likely to cause us to break our present patterns of talking about and to God and living in God's presence. But which one of us here is ready and willing and able to live at table with the poor? None of us, without the conversion in which God by forgiving us frees us from our sin; the conversion in which God frees us from our fear of death and the self-possessiveness of life because of our fear of death. Thus have many of us in this Institute emphasized the work of the Spirit, who frees us from our compulsions of our sin and guilt and our neurotic compulsions by which we try to protect ourselves from death.

Life in the Spirit with the poor might give us some solidarity with the Apostolic faith, which Outler called "an illicit faith of oppressed peoples in the Roman Empire." This in turn could give us a fresh vantage point for struggling with the Apostolic faith process. Geoffrey Wainwright made some inventive suggestions about what Methodists can both contribute and gain in this process. Life in the Spirit with the poor might at last help us to see that the Trinity is not meant to be idle speculation. Rather, the Trinity is the hermeneutic of the biblical narrative and of our reading of our present context. The Trinity should be the Christian way of naming God for the sake of Jesus Christ and for criticizing domination in the present.

The problems of the Trinity are as much alive today as at the time of Nicea, though with different forms. The Methodist family will need extraordinary patience to work through the questions of naming God in a trinitarian way, for if we let the teaching of and through the Trinity go, we shall

surely succumb to one destructive definition of divine power after another. (Wesley had no idea that lay people should be protected from the Trinity; trinitarian teaching is to be found throughout the early Methodist hymnody.)

The masters and rulers have always been glad to be theists and deists if God's power can accordingly be defined so as to correspond to and justify their power. The universal pretensions to power in both West and East make use of "uncrucified," nontrinitarian, noncommunal concepts of God. God is not a radical individual who owns Godself and can thus be the ground of Western possessive individualism. Neither is God an undifferentiated society that can be the ground of Eastern personless collectivity. God is a community of persons with distinct tasks but united by self-giving love. The Cappadocian doctrine of the mutual coinherence of the divine community (περιχωρήσις) is still the best thing we have going for a criticism of the racial, sexual, political, and economic oppressions of our time.

So, it seems to me, the path that lies ahead of us is the Wesleyan mediation, through the grace of the living Host who yearns for a new household, of the experience of the poor, the Spirit's conversion of our lives, and the Tradition. In what kind of household can this take place?

Let me conclude by shifting to a more sermonic mode. Things are changing in the Methodist household. That is an unmistakable learning of this Institute. In the midst of the change we should be aware that God is a strange housebuilder of a strange house. It is a resurrection household that God is struggling to build, a household in which we shall all be able to dance, without our inhibitions and our stiff joints. But God will call the tune. In the resurrection household all the household rules get changed.

So it is when the prodigal son returns from the heroin nightmare of his extreme liberal bout with unaccountable freedom, expecting to find a new lease in the conservative legalism of the old household rules. Redemption happens on the road, beyond all best thoughts of liberalism and conservatism, when the father breaks every rule of proper household management. The father rushes to embrace the foul-smelling, dirt-caked child, whereas all power-shrewd people know that he should have stayed in his wing-backed chair surrounded by all of the symbols of his paternal authority. He forgives the son even before the confession is completed, whereas after considerable parental experience I have discovered that one should let children spill all of the beans for future evidence. The father orders clothes, not work clothes or casual wear, but the three-piece suit, but that should have been saved for the highest event of the year. The father calls for a ring, not his fraternity ring, but his father's own ring, but that should have been saved for the older son. The father asks for meat, not the rump roast, but filet mignon, but that should have been saved for the holiest meal

of the year. The father announces a party, not your regular Saturday night soiree, but the biggest blow-out yet, but that should have been saved for the celebration of the older son's patrimony. Why all this? "For this my son was dead, and he is alive."

The story does not end happily because the older son does not go into the resurrection celebration. And those of us who are older daughters and sons know why: it is simply not fair that the household rules be changed. I can see the younger daughters and sons shedding a tear for us. But who of us, after all, is not an older daughter and son?

We Methodists stand between the old household in which each of us knows what we will inherit and are so intent upon it that we do not even question the old household rules and the new household which God is building. The invitation to dance is being given freely in the new household. The medieval pictures of the risen Lord dancing, with his cloak extended to include all in the dance, catch the spirit of this resurrection household. Would that we let the Holy Spirit catch us up into this dance. Would that we devote our work to this new household, with its strange, frightening but utterly joyful dance. In a world which seeks everything but home the only unity and consensus worth searching for is that found in the crucified One who nevertheless dances.

7. Ibid., p. viii.

8. Ibid., p. 121.

9. Ibid., p. 122; cf. p. 100.

10. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

11. Hick's phrase, *ibid.*, p. 168.

12. Ibid., p. 9.

13. Ibid., p. 176.

14. Ibid., p. 202.

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1. P. 79 in this volume.

2. For the following see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

3. Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits of Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 87.