

dispute, his efforts to identify what is fundamental and essential in the gospel, bespeaks a theory of the relatedness (relativity) of religious approaches to truth. How does appropriation of this dimension of Wesley's work orient us in interfaith dialogue and the encounter with other spiritualities in our time?

- (12) "Toward a Political Spirituality: Resources and Limits of Wesleyan Spirituality"—Are there resources in Wesley for a political spirituality, and what are the resources and limitations of Wesley's spirituality?
- (13) "Methodist Spiritual Praxis in the Bands and Classes: the Dynamics and Possibilities of Group Spiritual Directions."
- (14) "Wesley's Spirituality as Reflected in the Biographical Traditions: A Critical and Historical Survey."
- (15) "Holiness and Happiness: Wesley's Vision of Fully Realized Humanity."

A Retrospect

Brian E. Beck

The seventh Institute broke new ground in being more of a working conference than its predecessors since 1958. Smaller specialist groups in which much of the work was done allowed deeper engagement with particular aspects of the subject. The seventh Institute also marked a further stage in the progressive narrowing down of the meaning of the words "Methodist Theological Studies" as traditionally included in the Institute's title, from "theological studies done by Methodists" to "studies of the Methodist contribution to theology." This was a welcome development, for there is little point in Methodists from all over the world gathering for study unless they consider some aspect of their specifically Methodist contribution. The Institute also succeeded in being more representative of that world constituency, including churches not officially counted in the Methodist "family" but which have inherited and value a Wesleyan tradition. It was not always clear, however, that the different voices were equally successful in making themselves adequately heard, and there is certainly scope for improving the representative character of the Institute, if the economic and other problems can be overcome.

The theme of the Institute, "The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions," implies a question, and it is important to ask why we pose it. We cannot know what the future holds, and in predictive terms the question is unanswerable. But insofar as it lies in our hands to shape the future, we may properly ask how we may secure a place in it for our traditions, what form they might take, and whether

we can now discern any undeveloped potential that we should exploit for future benefit. But in doing so, it is important to be clear about our motives.

Are we anxious about survival? It is natural to fear death, and institutions and social groups may fear it as much as individuals. Are we then seeking reassurance that what we believe in can survive in the next generation and so demonstrate the value of our belief even in our own? If so we might reflect that historically Christianity has taken many forms, which have proved to be impermanent because the social settings for which they were adopted have themselves not survived, but this does not entitle us to judge that they were without value in those settings. Even if it should prove to be the case that two centuries from now Methodism had had its day (not just as churches, as Professor Wainwright suggests, but as a family of traditions), why should we not now give thanks to God for the day he has given and be glad, like Charles Wesley, to "serve the present age?"

Is it a question of identity? In many parts of the world, Methodists form minority churches, surrounded by much larger communities of Lutherans, Roman Catholics, or Anglicans. The Methodist movement for world evangelism finds itself working alongside other evangelistic organizations. In such situations there is a natural urge to know who we are and why we are different. To say simply, on the analogy of the well-stocked supermarket, that variety of choice is good for the customer only trivializes the missionary enterprise. If we are doing no more than peddling the same goods under a different label, it is a poor witness to the Lord who offers to gather a fragmented and strife-torn world into one, and in John's gospel prays that his disciples may reflect the unity of Father and Son that the world may be better able to believe. In any case (if we must use commercial metaphors), would not a merger improve sales efficiency? It may be that in some parts of the world the real reason why we are distinct from other Christian groups is simply that we belong to a different social class, have different historical origins, or use a different set of social customs. If that is the case, let us be bold enough to admit it; it is a fact of no small theological significance in itself, and there would be no need

to cast around for a distinctive theology that we could adopt to justify our separate existence.

If there is a properly theological reason why we should be concerned with the future of our traditions and anxious to preserve their integrity, it will be because of their wider value. Can it be that we have something to give, held in trust for the whole church and for the world, which we ought to discover and make more explicitly our own? Our question necessarily has ecumenical and global implications.

In answer to the question the Institute spent much of its time discussing John Wesley. In many ways the group on Wesley Studies made the running and other groups took up the theme. The central question then became, what does Wesley offer to the church today? Several answers were given. One was that the value lies in the man himself. One consequence of the Incarnation is that God continues to give himself to us through the lives of persons who have been formed by the Spirit of Christ. So the lives of the saints are a benefit to the church. The historical study of Wesley's life would have the value of setting before us the man in his genuine humanity, with both strengths and weaknesses, with the evidence of both grace and sin, as a testimony to the continuing work of Christ in human lives. This underlines the importance of the case made by the Wesley Studies group for a new study, embracing the whole of his life in its broadest historical context, using a proper critical edition of his works, and ignoring the glamorizing portrayals that most of us were brought up on. We need to be reminded that much of the image we have of Wesley is his own self-portrait, projected for the public through his published works. There is scope for the kind of psychological analysis Professor Fowler offered in his paper, and we need to be reminded that every historian writes within a context, so that what appears interesting and significant may depend on whether you are sitting in Oxford, Sao Paolo, or Budapest. More of that later.

As to the particular question of Wesley's thought, however, three principal answers were given. On the one hand it was observed in discussion that on various specific points, Wesley, like any other writer, has useful and stimulating things to say on issues of continuing interest. His

views on medicine in the *Primitive Physic* and the many opinions he expresses in the *Letters* were cited as examples. They are of value in themselves, not as parts of a larger system. At the other end of the scale, while it would not be possible to claim Wesley as a systematic theologian in the tradition of Aquinas or Calvin, he can be held up as an example of how to do theology: a people's theologian, working out what the truth of God must be in the light of what was happening in the lives of the Methodist people, looking for coherence rather than formal system, trying to state theology in simple terms, sharpening his ideas in controversy over the work of mission. Here the emphasis is on method, part of which will be what he based his theology on, the so-called quadrilateral of scripture, the ancient church, reason, and experience.

Between these alternatives is the view that regards Wesley as important because of certain broad themes in his thought. It was interesting to see how these emerged, developing in a sort of consensus. There was frequent reference to grace, especially prevenient grace, with its implications for the way we regard those who do not confess faith in Christ, and there was much stress on holiness as the essence of the work of God (being both a gift of grace at a moment in time and a matter of continual growth in grace), holiness as the expression of what it means to be fully human, and above all holiness as love, with its social implications, particularly identification with the poor. Another aspect, to which Professor Wainwright drew attention, was Wesley's particular combination of traditional doctrines, the "proportion of the faith."

It is surprising that more was not made of Wesley's emphasis on discipline and good order, his method-ism. Whatever may have been the psychological basis of the discipline he exercised over himself and the Methodists, it has theological significance in that it betrays the assumption that Christian living is life in community, in which we are accountable to and for one another. It would be valuable to explore in a future Institute the extent of this legacy today in different branches of Methodism and various parts of the world. If I am right in thinking that a love of order, with

centralized and regulated patterns of church government, still shows itself in all our traditions (witness our volumes of church discipline and constitutional practice), this is a contribution to the doctrine of the church.

But this approach raises a number of questions, for it is an inadequate answer to a question about the future of the Methodist traditions, still less adequate for a question about the future of Methodist churches. Wesley's writings are as accessible to non-Methodists as to Methodists; all that is needed is a good edition of his works. Historical study cannot be kept within the family; indeed some of the more important contributions have already come from outside it. If there is anything, therefore, which present-day Methodists have in trust for the world, it will be Wesley as mediated through our traditions—Wesley as he still lives in the life, thought, and activity of Methodists and others who look to him for their origins. That is the reason for Methodists to explore and reappropriate their heritage.

Our Methodist traditions are many and varied, and are the result of many influences beside John Wesley (the hymns of his brother Charles, for example, not really to be subsumed under his brother's thought in spite of the fact that they were published with John's editing and imprimatur. For most Methodists in the English-speaking world, they are the only first-hand contact with the writings of either brother). Professor Tamez drew attention to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Methodists in her paper, and cited their example for our current task of interpretation, but the Institute gave little attention to the nineteenth century except to decry its view of Wesley. Our manifold traditions deserve closer study. Disquiet was expressed for example over the report of the group on Ecclesiology and the Sacraments because its response to the WCC document was not felt to be broadly representative, and as we all know, there is often a gap between the official view of our tradition and what it actually is among the people of the church. The Wesleyan tradition has been watered down in all our churches over two hundred years.

The answer to this is not a mere revival of antiquity. We cannot and must not try to get back to him; that would be to

deny all that God has given to the world in various movements, secular and religious, since his time. The twentieth century is not and cannot be the eighteenth. What we can and should do is to expose ourselves to Wesley afresh, so that as churches and as individuals we may be mediators through whom the gifts God gave us in Wesley can be shared with the rest of the world. As Professor Wainwright indicated in his paper, the Wesleyan tradition for our time has to be embodied in us. But that leads to the further question of Wesley's authority.

What authority should Wesley have for Methodists? It is clear that he does not simply lay down a form of orthodoxy to which we have to subscribe. Our various doctrinal standards do not require this, and in any case eighteenth-century answers will not do for twentieth-century questions. As Professor Tamez argued, we have to get away from quoting proof-texts and see the whole Wesley in his whole context and relate him to ourselves in our contexts, if we are to find in him any help for our own situation. An alternative is to regard his writings as an anthology of ideas from which we select what we already agree with, but this is merely to hijack him for our own cause. What then is (or should be) his authority? Professor Meeks introduced this problem at the beginning of the Institute, but we did not resolve it. The terms "mentor" and "teacher" were suggested, which are helpful in ruling out some alternatives, but an examination of the work of some of the groups might suggest that they are still operating with other assumptions. The temptation to resort to proof-texts taken out of context (and sometimes misquoted second-hand) is strong. More work needs to be done on this question.

It is of course only one aspect of the wider question of all authority in Christian theology, whether it be the authority of the Fathers, or of the Creeds, or even of the Scriptures. In each case we are looking for an understanding of authority, which will give definition and identity to the community that accepts it, provide inspiration and direction for the renewal of its thought, and yet allow it the freedom to be an authentic community of its own time. In each case there is the further question of the role of tradition in the interpretation of

authoritative texts. Historic documents do not merely belong to the past; they live on in the life of the communities accepting their authority. But precisely because they are historic, earthed in a particular setting in the past, they cannot simply be assimilated to the present. They challenge our current understandings by their historical strangeness. Neither Wesley nor Luther (nor for that matter, Paul) can be treated as a ventriloquist's dummy for the utterance of our twentieth-century ideas, yet without their modern disciples they would remain, in an important sense, dumb. In each case, too, there is the tension between the work of the historical scholar or exegete and the present day heir of the tradition. Who better understands Benedict, the (possibly agnostic) historian or the monk who today lives according to the Rule? We are familiar with these questions in relation to the Bible but they apply to all theological authorities. Scripture in one sense remains a special case because its authority is primary, but I suspect that the answer will take a similar form in each case.

In the case of Methodism, however, there is a further complexity. Dr. Outler in his paper and the Wesley Studies group in their report stressed the importance of the whole Wesley in all his writings seen in their context and with all the development of his thought (although I presume that does not necessarily mean that the elder Wesley's thoughts were always better than his earlier ones). But many Methodist churches have official books of discipline or foundation deeds containing legal definitions of Methodist doctrinal standards. These often refer only to the first four volumes of the *Sermons*, the *Notes on the New Testament*, and perhaps the *Articles of Religion*. This is hardly the whole Wesley! In the practical application of authority in the life of the church, we are required to refer to a corpus of writings far more limited. There is a historical reason for this "canon" of writings, in some cases going back to Wesley's own specification. Is there also a theological justification, or ought we to be looking towards a revision of our official standards? What if this is not legally possible?

This discussion suggests that there is more work to be done on a number of fundamental questions. This was of course

recognized, and each group produced a fairly extensive list of projects to be pursued in its own field. So far, I have tried to stress the particular need to broaden the examination to include our traditions as they have developed from Wesley. There are, however, other issues that arose and must count as unfinished business.

It became apparent in discussion that we were deeply divided on the subject of evangelism, which occupies a major part of the programme of the World Methodist Council. To some extent the differences ran along geographical lines but not entirely so. Fundamental to the debate is the legitimacy of hope and prayer for a world Christian awakening, and the relationship between evangelism designed, under God, to provoke that awakening, on the one hand, and on the other, two equally deeply held Christian convictions, the concern to respect the integrity of other faiths and the concern to see the righteousness of God embodied in a just social order. That debate is reflected in other pages of this volume and will continue. Here I simply press the need for caution when talking of global evangelism. Professor Wainwright in his paper drew attention to the dangers of Constantinianism (the alliance of church and state) and the consequences especially when the quality of religion declines. If we seriously talk of world or even national conversion, how are we to guard against the church swallowing up the state, only later to become secularized by it? Is it possible to build into our evangelism safeguards against the dangers of success? Indeed, we need a thorough critique of the concept of success in the life of the church. The view often seems to be held that "success" is a test of truth. If it works, it must be true; if people are converted in large numbers, the message must be right. There are grave dangers in thinking that, unless we are more than usually self-critical. "Woe to you, when all . . . speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

What is success? As Wesley Ariarajah, among others, insisted, Wesley's concern was not simply for conversions but for scriptural holiness. This is much harder to measure and impossible to count as conversions may be counted. But it may take us nearer to the heart of the matter. Is the real test

of the faithfulness of the church its diligence in evangelism, important as that is? Is it, to sharpen the question, evangelism that leads to conversions? Or is it readiness to go to the cross? One very common reading of Mark's gospel, after all, is to see it as a protest against superficial views of success and a recall to the way, not of popular support but of rejection and loneliness—the way of the cross. It would be a strange distortion of the gospel of Christ to depict a thousand conversions as success if thereby martyrdom counted as failure.

Conversion is, of course, an ambiguous word. For example, Ariarajah said in his paper that there is no such thing as conversion in the conventional sense because what occurs is only a movement from prevenient grace to justifying grace; we are talking about a new and different response to the God we already know. I doubt whether this view takes seriously enough the fact of sin—grace, in Wesley's mind, whether prevenient or justifying, can be resisted. The pathway to redemption is not just from one expression of grace to another but from resistance to grace to full trust and obedience. Even so this view is different from the idea of conversion as a shift from a world without Christ to a world with him. Professor Fowler, using the word *faith* in a more general sense, showed how a person with any world view, be it Christian, Jewish, or scientific humanist, may move from one stage of faith to another. He allowed in discussion that conversion is possible in the sense that we may move sideways, so to speak, from one world view to another. In Fowler's words, there may be "a reseating of the will, a redirection of the affections, a move to a new master story"—so a Muslim may become a Christian. But although the account he gave of John Wesley laid stress on the importance of Aldersgate Street, it did not give any clear portrayal of a conversion in that sense. As he acknowledged in the ensuing discussion, "the real question is how justification cuts across the naturalistic development."

These two examples illustrate the ambiguities and looseness of the word *conversion*, which in all our traditions must surely rank as one of the most frequently used words in the Methodist vocabulary. This is not surprising, since the word,

and equivalents like *repent* and *return* have been used in widely different ways throughout Christian history from the Bible onwards. There would be value in a Methodist exploration of this issue and, in particular, of the usefulness of the term in the context of stages of development as well as of critical change, its legitimacy as a synonym for justification, and its appropriateness to John Wesley on May 24, 1738.

More work also needs to be done on Wesley's so-called "order of salvation" (the *ordo salutis*). What has the idea of stages of salvation in religious experience to say to us? Even if we succeed in correlating Wesley's stages with Professor Fowler's stages of faith, is the notion of definable steps in the Christian life (if these are seen as prescriptive and not merely descriptive) a helpful contribution to modern spirituality? The work of the group on Spirituality and Faith-development helpfully opened up new approaches to these issues, but we have only begun to look at the questions psychology poses, not just for Wesley's character but for his theology and pastoral methods, including questions about conscience and assurance (especially assurance of perfection). One of the most striking aspects of the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* today is its psychological naivety. But the questions are not only psychological. Wesley's understanding of spiritual development also has to be assessed against the long tradition of Christian spiritual direction from the Desert Fathers onwards.

In retrospect there were two particular ways in which the Institute could have made better use of the opportunities it had, and it is appropriate for one of the organizers to point them out. One was our failure to make full use of the particular skills of members who were professional biblical scholars. The main themes of Wesley's theology are biblical, at least in his intention: grace, justification, sanctification. Yet our appreciation of these in their biblical expression has changed dramatically since his time. It would be a disservice to our times if, in restoring the original Wesley, we merely canonized his understanding of the Bible. We need parallel biblical studies to set alongside his treatment of these themes. Beyond this, however, is the problem of hermeneutics. We have referred to the question of tradition and interpretation,

and the nature of authority already. There is a further more general point. Much was said at the Institute about interpreting Wesley right: the whole Wesley in context, interpreted in relation to our own context. That is a very sophisticated process, which demands above all a sense of the difference between two cultures in history. At the same time it was said that Wesley can be read by ordinary people. Certainly if he was a theologian for the common people we must not imprison him in our lecture-rooms and libraries. But how are the ordinary people to read him and not misinterpret him or be put off by his more conservative social attitudes? How indeed are they to read him at all in many parts of the world without translation, and if translation of all his extensive works is impracticable (and who apart from scholars will read them all?), what selection will authentically represent him? These are just the sort of problems biblical scholars face about the interpretation and ready availability of the far more ancient texts of Scripture. Some interaction between disciplines would have been helpful here.

Secondly, the Institute only partly fulfilled its avowed aim of making possible dialogue between specialists in different fields. The working groups were designed to make it possible to study limited subjects in depth, but it was hoped that there would also be intergroup dialogue, so that experts in each field would be exposed to the knowledge and criticism of those in other fields. This happened only to a limited extent. It may be that there was insufficient time both for the process of group integration and for real exchange between groups. However, the Institute would have been more fruitful if such integration had taken place.

Those who felt this lack most sharply were members of the Salvation and Justice group, especially representatives from Latin America, who felt that by their very preoccupation with certain questions to the exclusion of others, the majority of the Institute had failed to hear and be influenced by their insistence that the experience of the poor in their struggle for human dignity and social justice specifies the theological questions to be discussed, and makes possible a new creative insight into what the tradition holds in store (a criticism that may be apposite to the present paper, which has not

attempted to summarize the whole Institute's work or be even-handed in its comments). Their insistence on the value of John Wesley for Latin American Methodists was striking, and perhaps to some more disillusioned Western representatives, surprising. There was certainly some misunderstanding. The report of the Salvation and Justice group sparked off a debate in which some questions of definition were clarified, but the use of the term *poverty* remained a stumbling-block. *Poverty* is notoriously difficult to define in any context, but the breadth of its meaning in theological discussion was not always realized. The poor comprise not only those who lack food, clothing, and shelter, but also those who, while they may have material possessions in some measure, are deprived of freedom, opportunity, and their fair share of power in the community.

The context in which we do our theological work is crucial and affects everyone. It explains perhaps why the subjects covered by some groups had greater appeal to representatives of some churches than others. Context also influenced our capacity to listen. Those who come from large churches, which in addition have traditionally acted as missionary agencies, perhaps find it more difficult to recognize the extent to which their own perception of the world and their appreciation of the Methodist tradition is conditioned by the setting in which they live. It is tempting to react to other views as deviations from the authentic tradition once passed on to their now wayward children. It does not help that these ecclesiastical relationships are often entangled with political relationships between the nations in which the churches are set. Nineteen eighty-two was the year of the Falklands war.

Various responses are possible. One is to react defensively, but with impeccable logic, and say that if theology is to be "contextual" and reflect the priorities determined by the setting where the theologian lives, then no one can decree that what is required by one setting must become mandatory for others whose context suggests other preoccupations. That would be to close the door to dialogue and deny the catholicity of the church. It may well be a truer response, more true indeed to the Methodist traditions derived from John Wesley, to see that Christian theology, if it is to be an

exposition of God's response to the plight of the world, must always take account of the needs of the poor and the lost, and that insofar as he was a "theologian of the poor" John Wesley was a better theologian and more authentic Christian.

However that may be, it is hoped that the next Institute will be able to build upon the foundation laid in 1982, carry forward the exploration of our traditions on a broader front, and, being more representative of the diversity of those traditions, enable all the churches to appreciate more fully what our contribution to the future of the church universal might be.