

## Introduction

M. Douglas Meeks

The essays of this book were originally given as papers at the Eighth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies convened at Somerville College, Oxford, England, in the summer of 1987. The theme of the Institute, "The Significance of Methodist Teaching and Practice for Confessing the Apostolic Faith," emerged out of an historic moment of the church's search for integrity and unity in its teaching. The theme reflects a period in which the churches of the world Methodist and Wesleyan traditions are searching for a fresh approach to the standards of teaching the faith. The question is pressed whether there is a theological consensus in world Methodism about what Methodist/Wesleyan churches should teach and what they should contribute to the *oikumene*. What would it require for these churches to work toward such a consensus on sound teaching and praxis? Are there valid limits of diversity, dissent, and conflict both among and in the Methodist churches?

As it hands on the faith to the next generation of Christians and reformulates it for proclamation and mission to the world, the Church must be clear about the content of its teaching and the ways in which it understands the truth of its teaching. As heuristic principles for studying Methodist consensus on teaching the faith the Institute worked with the questions for the first Methodist Conference in 1744: What to teach? How to teach? What to do? The following essays tend to give differing emphases to these questions. Some stress the content of Christian teaching, some deal with the peculiar difficulties of teaching the faith in modern society, and some focus on the praxis of faith as the key to teaching. Each author, however, comes to grips in his or her own way with several common questions: How are the authority and truth of Christian teaching to be established? In what ways has the authority of Christian teaching been distorted by the dominative ways of thinking and governing in the West and even by the church's own traditions? Is it possible to speak of the unity and truth of Christian teaching in a pluralistic society? Are there new models of unity? Are there new ways of understanding the truth of the faith in face of the all-encompassing exigencies of the human future?

Brian Beck's essay describes the context of this Institute and offers a realistic assessment of the ways in which the worldwide Methodist com-

munity of learning can address teaching. Beck argues that all ways of teaching the faith must recognize the particularity of the histories and contexts in which churches live and give witness to the world. The immediate goal of the scholarly community should not be convergence. Rather, teaching that serves the evangelism and mission of the church can lead to unexpected new realities in a richly diverse community.

Albert Outler also takes seriously the reality of dissensus and controversy in this period of the decline of the Enlightenment certainties. But he sees great contemporary relevance in Wesley's recourse to the Christian tradition in its diverse forms for new patterns of Christian unity today. As a crucial step toward consensus among Methodists Outler proposes a critical retrieval of Wesley's focus on the rule of grace through the person and work of the Holy Spirit. This could rescue Methodism from its domestications and provide an ecumenical soteriology of great interest to contemporary people weary of the modern lust after self-salvation.

C. K. Barrett takes a critical look at the biblical grounding of distinctive Methodist teachings on righteousness and justification and ways in which some traditional Methodist teachings might need to be corrected and energized by a critical reading of the scriptures. According to Barrett, the justification of sinners by grace through faith should remain the key to Methodist teaching.

G. R. Evans traces the great debates on consensus and dissensus in church teaching during the Reformation period as a background to Wesley's own search for a faith that has been held by all Christians everywhere and at all times. Is Christian truth essentially fixed? What part is played by the imaginative power of interpretation in the reception of the faith passed on? How can we be certain of the truth of the Apostolic faith and that we have truthfully interpreted it?

These questions do not belong only to the dusty past. They are very much alive in ecumenical theology today. Günther Gassmann provides an analysis of the process of the World Council of Churches study "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today," which has caught the imagination not only of the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics but also of Christians from the developing world. Geoffrey Wainwright proposes several ways in which Methodism can both benefit from and contribute to the WCC project. He demonstrates how Wesley's teaching was constitutively ecumenical and can be a model for our attempt today to hold together the confession of the one gospel in diverse contexts of the world.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Christian teaching today must be done in the face of radical diversity of cultural, socio-economic, political, and religious contexts. Several essays in this volume view the question of pluralism as the most thorny issue regarding the content, method, and

authority of Christian teaching. José Míguez Bonino asks how the church can teach universally on the questions of human survival which have become global when in a pluralized world almost everything the church says seems controversial. After comparing three different modes of ecclesiastical teaching on social questions, he argues that the assumptions of "liberal pluralism" may not serve the necessity of Christian teaching to choose concrete options in a particular political situation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye paints a vivid picture of the conflict in teaching among, on the one hand, the more traditional churches of Africa shaped by Western missions in which patriarchy and hierarchy destroy authority and, on the other hand, the emerging indigenous teaching which gains its authority from its empowering persons for liberation from their oppression. Adrian Hastings examines the situation of Christian teaching in the context of the pluralized university and argues that Christian teaching must have the courage to express its own particularity in a situation in which a misguided search for a universal religion assumes that everything scandalous about the historical reality of the religions can be transcended.

It is a delight to express our gratitude to the many persons and agencies who made the Institute possible. Among those are the Reverend Joe Hale, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, who was generous in his support. Donald Treese provided valuable advice on many aspects of the Institute's life and work. Financial subvention was provided by the Division of Ordained Ministry of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the United Methodist Board of Discipleship, the Overseas Division of British Methodism, and the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. The work of the Institute was greatly enhanced by the creative leadership of the Working Group Conveners: Phyllis Bird and Peder Borgen, Richard Heitzenrater and Thomas Langford, Donald Dayton and Reginald Ward, Philip Wogaman and José Míguez Bonino, David L. Watson and Lawi Imathiu, and Theodore Runyon and Norman Young.

The volume is dedicated to the memory of Albert C. Outler who for many years epitomized the spirit of the Oxford Institute and whose learning, teaching, and vision will surely shape its future service to the people called Methodist and to the *oikumene*.

## AUTHORS

### C. K. Barrett

C. K. Barrett took degrees at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and Wesley House, Cambridge. He served as a Methodist minister in Darlington. He became Lecturer in Theology at Durham University in 1945 and then Professor of Divinity 1958–1982. Among his books are *Commentary on John* (1955, 1978, 2nd ed.); *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* (1973); *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (1967); and *Freedom and Obligation* (1985).

### Brian E. Beck

Brian E. Beck was educated at Cambridge University (Corpus Christi College and Wesley House). He is a minister of the British Methodist Conference and has served in theological education both in Britain and in Kenya. From 1968 to 1984 he was Tutor and subsequently Principal of Wesley House, Cambridge. He is now Secretary of the British Methodist Conference. His publications include *Reading the New Testament Today* (1978). He is co-chair of the Oxford Institute.

### Gillian Evans

Gillian Evans was educated at the universities of Oxford (M.A., 1967; D.Litt., 1983), Reading (Ph.D., 1974), and Cambridge (Litt.D., 1983). She has lectured at the universities of Reading (History), Bristol (Theology), and Cambridge (History and Theology). In 1968–1988 she was British Academy Reader in Theology, while continuing her Cambridge post as University lecturer. She is an Anglican, a member of the Church of England's Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Board for Mission and Unity and of the Archbishop's Group on the Episcopate. Her books include *Anselm and Talking about God* (1978); *Augustine on Evil* (1983); *The Logic and Language of the Bible* (1984–1985, 2 vols.); and *Old Acts and New Theology* (1980).

**Günther Gassmann**

Günther Gassmann received his Dr. Theol. and was habilitated at Heidelberg University. He also studied theology at Oxford University. From 1963 to 1969 he was assistant professor of systematic theology at Heidelberg University and from 1969–1975 Research Professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strassbourg, France. Having served as President of the Central Office of the Lutheran Churches in West Germany and as Ecumenical Officer of the Lutheran World Federation, he is presently the Director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. His publications include two books on the historic episcopate in Anglicanism and on concepts of unity in the Faith and Order movement (in German). He has also written, with N. Ehrenström, *Confessions in Dialogue* (1975, 3rd ed.) and with H. Meyer *The Unity of the Church* (1983).

**Adrian Hastings**

Adrian Hastings studied history in Oxford and theology in Rome. After many years in East Africa he became a Lecturer and Reader in Religious Studies in the University of Aberdeen before returning to Africa for three years as Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Zimbabwe (1982–1985). He is now Professor of Theology and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Leeds. He is author of *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985* (1986); *A History of African Christianity 1950–1975* (1979); *The Faces of God* (1975); and *African Catholicism* (1989).

**M. Douglas Meeks**

M. Douglas Meeks was educated at Vanderbilt University, Rhodes College, Duke University, and Tübingen University where he was a Fulbright Fellow, 1968–1970. An ordained minister of the United Methodist Church, he is Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Meeks is author of *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (1972) and *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (1989), and editor of *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (1985). He is co-chair of the Oxford Institute.

### **José Míguez Bonino**

Educated at the Facultad Evangelica de Teologica and Emory University, José Míguez Bonino holds the Th.D. from Union Theological Seminary, New York. He has since 1983 been Robert W. Woodruff Distinguished Visiting Professor of Systematic Theology at Emory. His writings include *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (1976); *The Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies* (1983); and *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (1983).

### **Mercy Amba Oduyoye**

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Methodist from Ghana, was educated at the University of Ghana and Cambridge University. She is presently working in Geneva with the World Council of Churches as Deputy General Secretary and staff Moderator of the Programme Unit on Education and Renewal. She was Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, from 1974 to 1986 and during that period was editor of the department's journal *ORITA*. She has been a Ford Research Fellow and visiting Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School (1985–1986) and the Henry Luce Visiting Professor in World Christianity at the Union Theological Seminary in New York (1986–1987). She has been active in the World Student Christian Federation, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. She is author of *Hearing and Knowing* (1986) and numerous articles on African Christianity, Christian theology, and issues of feminism in Africa.

### **Albert C. Outler**

A Methodist minister and emerited professor of theology, Albert C. Outler was born in Georgia and educated at Wofford College (A.B., 1928), Emory University (B.D., 1933), and Yale University (Ph.D., 1938). His early ministerial service spanned ten years in rural and urban churches. He taught successively at Duke, Yale, and Southern Methodist Universities. He served as chair of the United Methodist Doctrinal Study Commission, 1968–1972. Involved in ecumenical affairs since 1935, he was a delegate to the Faith and Order Conferences at Lund (1952) and at Montreal (1963); member, Working Committee, 1953–1966; co-chair of a Faith and Order Study Commission, 1953–1966; delegated-observer at the Second Vatican Council. He received the Pax Christi Award from St. John's Abbey and University in 1987. His books include *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* (1957), the John Wesley volume in *A Library of Protestant Thought* (1964), *Who Trusts in God* (1968), and the Bicentennial Edition of John Wesley's *Sermons* (4 volumes, 1984–1987).

**Geoffrey Wainwright**

Educated in Cambridge, Geneva, and Rome, Geoffrey Wainwright holds the Dr. Theol. degree from the University of Geneva and the D.D. from Cambridge. He taught in Cameroon and in England before becoming Roosevelt Professor of Systematic Theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Since 1983 he has been Professor of Systematic Theology at Duke University. A minister of the British Methodist Church, he is a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and currently chairs the international dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church. Dr. Wainwright's dogmatic interests are represented by his *Eucharist and Eschatology* (1971) and *Doxology* (1980), and his ecumenism by *The Ecumenical Moment* (1983). He has edited *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (1989).

## ABBREVIATIONS FOR THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY

- Appeals* *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11: The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- Journal & Diaries* *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 18: Journal and Diaries I*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).
- Letters* *The Works of John Wesley, Volumes 25-25: Letters I-II*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-82).
- Letters (Telford)* *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931).
- Sermons* *The Works of John Wesley, Volumes 1-4: Sermons I-IV*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-87).
- Works* *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).