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Introduction

M. Douglas Meeks

The Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies was convened in the summer of 1982 at Keble College, Oxford. The Institute, as in the past, was composed of Methodist scholars, pastors, and church leaders from all over the world. This book contains the major papers given at the Institute, whose theme was "The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions."

The overall objective of the Oxford Institute is to nurture scholarship for the ministry and mission of Methodist and Wesleyan churches, which share a common life in the World Methodist Council. The Institute thus seeks to create a community of learning that respects John Wesley's insistence on the marriage of learning and piety.

The organization of the Seventh Institute will help to explain the format of this book. The members of this Institute were divided up into working groups that dealt with issues on the cutting edge of contemporary Methodist scholarship. The five working groups were: "Wesley Studies," "Salvation, Justice, and the Theological Task," "Ecclesiology and Sacraments in an Ecumenical Context," "Evangelism in the Wesleyan Traditions," and "Wesleyan Spirituality and Faith Development." Each field of study was represented by a major lecturer who addressed the entire Institute. The results of intensive, specialized scholarly work by each working group were then shared in the plenary via a working paper. A similar structure is reflected in this book. Following an introduction of the Institute's theme in chapter one, the reader will find each chapter containing the major lecture,

then the working paper of each field. The rich and complex developments within the working group on "Evangelism in the Wesleyan Traditions" have warranted the additional survey paper by David Lowes Watson. Brian E. Beck, Co-chairperson of the Institute, provides a retrospect of the Institute.

Christian scholarship in the broadest sense is the act of remembering the past and saying what it means today. Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, said, "Forgetfulness leads to exile. Remembrance is the secret of redemption." In this sense the Old Testament prophets were scholars. They remembered the past of God's faithfulness and said what it meant for the crises of the present. Indeed many persons who are considered activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., are in this sense basically scholars. King remembered the promises of God and said what they meant for his time and his nation. In this respect the faith of every Christian depends on remembering the past.

The Seventh Oxford Institute began with the premise that the future of Methodist and Wesleyan churches is put in jeopardy because of a widespread forgetfulness of their traditions. They are threatened with "exile," not the physical removal to a foreign land but the slow disappearance of their distinctive calling in Jesus Christ through accommodation and enculturation in their own lands. Without remembering their past they will know neither who they are in the present nor what they should expect from the future.

Methodism throughout the world is faced with the crisis, which is also an opportunity, in which it will have to give a defense (*apologia*) of the hope that is within it (I Pet. 3:15). What hope is there, what real anticipation of the future, in a time so threatened by the nuclear apocalypse and the intensifying and deadly struggle between the rich and the poor in our world? If there is a distinctively "Methodist" Christian *apologia*, it will surely not emerge without remembering what has been passed down to us through the Methodist traditions.

But are the Methodist traditions worth remembering? The energy and courage for remembering the past come first of all from God's forgiveness of our guilt. Just as guilty persons do

not have the freedom to play, neither can they remember the past. They spend too much energy repressing and forgetting a guilty past that has become loathsome to them. And thus Wesley knew there could be no learning for the sake of the gospel without the gift of the forgiveness of the learner. Prayer must ground and be conjoined with scholarship, doxology with theology. But the energy and courage of remembering the past also comes from a confidence that the past really does contain promises which open up the future and make a difference in the present. Otherwise the work of remembering and interpreting the tradition will seem sterile and unsavory. The essays collected here face the question about how the people called Methodist can be energized to remember their past in expectation of the future at a time when the future appears so threatened.

The Institute did not engage in nostalgia about the Methodist past. It is clear that we remember the Methodist traditions only because they help us to remember Jesus Christ as mediated through the scriptures. The fact that both tradition and scripture stand under the lordship of Jesus Christ means that the Methodist traditions must be retrieved critically. Thus the main theme of this book is a new assessment of the Methodist theological traditions in light of the life and death questions that world Methodism faces today.

It will be clear that these essays are the beginning of a process, not a finished edifice. On the whole they raise more questions than they give answers. They point to open vistas rather than report completed projects. They propose avenues for research in the Methodist traditions and thus invite all those who will into a worldwide community of Methodist scholarship. They offer imagination and encouragement for next steps in the journey of the Methodist/Wesleyan community of learning.

As Co-chairpersons of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Brian Beck and I wish to thank the many persons who gave of their time generously in the preparation and execution of the Institute. The Reverend Donald A. Pickard served skillfully as Secretary of the Institute. Reverend Joe Hale, General Secretary of the World Methodist

Council, gave support and encouragement. Financial assistance was provided by the Overseas Division of British Methodism, the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, and the Division of Ordained Ministry of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Special gratitude is due the convenors of the working groups for their creative leadership: Professor Albert C. Outler, Professor Theodore Runyon, Professor Geoffrey Wainwright, Professor David Lowes Watson, and Professor James Fowler. Finally, these fruits of the life and work of the Seventh Oxford Institute are dedicated to four persons to whose decanal vision and perseverance the Oxford Institute owes its existence.

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?

List of Authors

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