

On the Way to the New Creation...Something Old -- Something New: Roots and Wild Branches
in our Christian/Wesleyan Heritage
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Introduction:

In searching out beginnings of the Wesleyan tradition a couple of decades ago Richard P. Heitzenrater wrote of *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*. (1) In this Practical Theology Session of the 2002 Oxford Institute I begin my presentation with a single question: What can we learn about ancient Syriac Christianity of which John Wesley read and taught, and its later interpretation in the 20th and 21st centuries by the Orthodox Slavic world which will give us insights into our being a part of God's Christian Community?

Contemporary theologians and/or church historians can aid us in this quest. For the most part there will be the above cited Richard Heitzenrater, Professor at Duke Divinity School along with Geoffrey Wainwright also at Duke, who was co-editor of a major study of Spirituality, Ted Campbell recently President of Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, S T Kimbrough, Jr. of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministry, Orthodox Bishop Kallistos (Timothy Ware) of Oxford, England, and Sebastian Brock, an Anglican Scholar, also of Oxford, and the late Vladimir Lossky an Orthodox Scholar. He for 35 years, became an interpreter of Orthodoxy after choosing to be exiled from Russia in 1923.

A female writer, Kathleen McVey of Brown University, has become a great interpreter of St. Ephrem, the Syriac Deacon of the Antiochian Church in the 4th Century. Both Kimbrough and McVey have a great interest in the hymnology of St. Ephrem and Kimbrough has compared some of the ideology/theology of both St. Ephrem and Charles Wesley. This may be both a wild branch and roots which form the basis of our discussion. I face the "So what" question: How might ancient Syrian Christian perspectives impact upon a 21st Century Wesleyan emphasis on Practical/Pastoral Theology of Caring?

Why Explore St. Ephrem's (the Syriac) Writings in the 21st Century?

The recently published (2002) *Consultations between scholars examining Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (edited by S T Kimbrough, Jr., Associate General Secretary of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministry) (2) has raised the question to a higher level of visibility. Those dialogues held in 1999 on the campus of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, Crestwood, New York, sought common ground on which the Wesley brothers and many of the Eastern Fathers (and hopefully Mothers) stood. In that context as well as in our 2002 context it is important to be open to both commonalities and differences. The Wesleyan themes of holiness and perfection can be explored as roots which may also be perceived by some as wild branches.

These are two separate bodies of Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox whose roots can be traced to the first four centuries of Christianity, and the Wesleyan movement out of our Anglican tradition (and for the most part Western Church roots), which is only in its third century of functioning.

While on the British Ship *Symonds* going from England to the British colonies (four decades before Independence) there is a record of John Wesley reading works of St. Ephrem the Syriac. ". . . he read from Ephrem Syrus in Georgia during fifty seven sitting between September and December 1736." (3) He was reading these works with Sophie Hopkey and Ms. Bovey. He

was tutoring these two female friends/parishioners ? and later Ms. Bovey dropped out of the tutoring relationship. Sophie Hopkey and John Wesley came to a parting of the ways. She later married another and about that time the Wesley brothers departed the New World for England. So much for John Wesley's tutoring on St. Ephrem.

In Ted Campbell's explorations of John Wesley's sources reported in his *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (4) he draws the conclusion that John Wesley made 201 references to the Church Fathers. Wesley, early in his theological grounding and personal and professional identity pursuit up to March 2, 1731, made 127 notations of Augustine's *Confessions and Meditations*. (5) To the lament of some part of the theological stance of one branch of Methodism (United Methodists) the issue of sin, particularly Original Sin, is more Augustinian in interpretation than some stances taken by the Eastern Church Fathers. The contrasts are as follows: "We believe man is fallen from righteousness, and apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and inclined to evil. . . . We believe however, man influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit is responsible in freedom to exercise his will for good." (6) The emphasis on Free will is a theological position common in the Eastern Church Fathers.

In contrast, at the close of the 20th Century a theologian of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America writes: "The Eastern Christian understanding of human nature, in confirming its basic goodness, counters the typical excuse that when we sin we are 'only being human,' with the assertion that when we sin we are, in fact, not being human enough! Sinfulness is unnatural for us, and man's willful fall into sin did not end God's approval of humanity per se. The Incarnation is the mark of that approval, for Christ could not have put on something innately sinful." (7) The emphasis on the Incarnation is a common meeting ground as we seek to be a part of the New Creation.

Rather than being natural, sin is inhuman denying God's intended divinity for us. Whereas Wesley is often closely viewed as Augustinian around the doctrine of Original Sin he seems to have redeemed himself (metaphorically, but not literally) by turning to the Eastern Church Fathers. The late Albert Outler may have overstated the case (who am I to take on the task of deconstructing Outler) about finding adequate proofs of J. Wesley's reliance on Eastern Church Fathers. Two other former students of Outler are admirers of their mentor and seek to preserve Outler's legacy. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, in editing Outler's essays quote the following:

All I can say about Wesley's doctrine of grace --- without elaboration ---is that he thought of grace as the divine energy in and for persons (thus prevenient and cooperating as well as saving). . . . Grace is sacramental (i.e., always mediated in and through the creature) but not sacerdotal (i.e., never at human disposal). (8)

J. Wesley, according to Outler in his highly favored reference to St. Ephrem had a similar vision of Christian existence which involved seeing " . . . the same vision of Christian existence that he also had come to have, viz., the progressive surrender of the human will to God, always freely out of love, the prevenient action of the Holy Sprit in all human reactivity, the changes rung on the theme of impartation and participation in God's grace metousia theou the overflow of the super abundance of divine goodness." (9)

Can the Contemporary Orthodox Church Enlighten Us Wesleyans?

One of the most clear spokespersons for contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy is Bishop Kallistos/Timothy Ware. He writes that “St. Ephraim of Syris rightfully spoke of ‘the church of the penitents, the church of those who perish,’ but this Church is at the same time the icon of the Trinity.” (10) A characteristic of the church is its experience of the “communion of saints” and in this sinners become something different from being identified as individuals. Being in the body of Christ is the basis for being something different. This perspective was expressed earlier by the late Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff as he sought to answer the question: “What Holds the Church Together?” (11)

Orthodoxy has a lot to say about union with Christ. We become “. . . a union of the creature of God, fulfilled in the person of Christ.” (12) Sebastian Brock sees St. Ephrem, along with Macarius the Egyptian as influencing J. Wesley’s perspectives on perfection and repentance. It was St. Ephrem’s expression of theology through poetry which seems to have captured attention of Kathleen E. McVey. In her work: “Ephrem the Syrian: A Theologian of the Presence of God” (13) she seeks to identify his importance for history and theology. “One aspect of his thought that is of enduring interest and continuous importance for all the Orthodox traditions as well as for Western Christianity is the presence of God in the World.” (14) McVey identifies two important strands in Ephrem’s writings: an understanding of the Incarnation “followed by the closely related notions of spiritual progress and sanctification, or theosis (divinization).” (15)

The Incarnation became the linchpin of Ephrem’s theology. On the one hand a person finds the self abasement of God which is both miraculous and paradoxical. In the act of the Incarnation Ephrem sees the language and imagery of Divine compassion, mercy and maternal love. In Ephrem’s Hymns on the Nativity 4.5 he celebrates the feast of the Nativity as the Day on which “the Compassionate One came out to sinners.” (16) The Compassionate one put on the garment of the body to rescue Adam and He bore our pain. “Christians are expected to imitate the merciful condescension of their redeemer.” (17)

In her appraisal McVey binds the imitation of Christ to non-violent behavior. Furthermore, the “. . . divine condescension to humankind in the Incarnation has brought about a permanent change in the relationship between human beings and their Creator. (18) “. For him, the Incarnation not only opens up the way to theosis but it also brings a humanization of God.” (19)

Ephrem advocated Spiritual Progress and Sanctification or Theosis. Both Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and John the beloved disciple are especially significant in Ephrem’s understanding of this vital topic.

Mary and John see in one another the complementary mysteries of God’s condescending love and the bold access to Divine love now open to human beings. Through them we, too, may see this twofold mystery of our Savior. John, identified with the “beloved disciple” of the Fourth Gospel, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are “types” through whom we are able to see Christ as in a mirror while they themselves saw Him in one another. Ephrem begins by evoking the scene at the foot of the cross as it is portrayed in John’s Gospel, where Jesus invites Mary and John to regard one another as mother and son: (20)

Blessed are you, O woman, whose Lord and son entrusted you to one fashioned in His image. The Son of your womb did not wrong your love, but to the son of His bosom He entrusted you. Upon your bosom you caressed Him when He was small, and upon His bosom He also caressed [John], so that when He was crucified He repaid all you had advanced to Him, the debt of his upbringing.

For, the crucified repaid debts; even yours was repaid by Him. He drank from your breast visible milk, but [John drank] from His bosom hidden mysteries.

Confidently He approached your breast; confidently [John] approached and lay upon His bosom. Since you missed the sound of His voice, He gave you his harp to be a consolation to you. (21)

“So What?” for Pastoral Care in Practical Theology

Syriac spirituality spread east through Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and then on to India by the 8th Century. There is reason to link Syriac spirituality to that which still exists in South India to the church which tradition has it that the Disciple Thomas established. Now referred to as the “Mar-Thoma Church” it stands as a beacon for Christianity in that land. What does all of this mean for us who think and minister in the Wesleyan tradition? At this Oxford Institute we are on the grounds on which this tradition had its origins in Oxford, England in the first third of the eighteenth century. Wesley along with the pastoral visits he made with Hester (Hetty) Ann Rogers, half-Wesley’s age and the spouse of a clergy modeled the kind of Pastoral Care which lived out his theology of providing care especially to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. The Incarnation and Kenosis

In Syriac Spirituality there is an emphasis on the Incarnation. One way of viewing our function as spiritual care ministers is that being a part of Christ’s Church we are an extension of the Incarnation. There is both being filled of the Incarnate Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Also, we experience the emptying in Kenosis. Both concepts were present with St. Ephrem. This identifies the paradoxical nature of our functioning in Spiritual Care.

Union and Community With God

People in crisis seek a union with the Holy. Syriac and later Slovonian Spirituality espoused the importance of the Eucharist on Communion as an experience of common union with God. Since a great thrust of the Wesleys was to move people into an experience of holiness it has its parallels in both Syriac and Slovonian Spirituality as holiness was not being primarily an aim of individual perfection “. . . but a sharing of the life of communion that exists in God.”(22) The focus on Sacraments is common in both the Wesleyan and Syriac traditions. Communion can be experienced as a common union.

A great deal of spiritual care/pastoral care responds to person’s sense of brokenness and or emptiness. “Union with God is the goal of theosis and the content of salvation.” (23) I equate salvation with wholeness/holiness. In providing spiritual care we are seeking to guide people to the state of wholeness which they seek. My thesis is that within the traditions of Syriac, Slovonian, and Wesleyan Spirituality we have the means of enabling persons to reach that state of inwardness called peace with God which persons seek.

I am proposing a reexamination of how the Syriac, Slovonian, and Wesleyan Spiritual

traditions can guide both our theory development and our practices of Spiritual Care. Four decades back I was pursuing a Master's degree thesis in Clinical Psychology. I was asking a single question: "How do values develop in people?" One of the theoreticians was the late O. Hobart Mowrer, Research Psychologist at the University of Illinois. Then he stated, "the problems of the churches and seminaries is that they sold their souls for a mess of psychological pottage." While I was on a Spiritual Retreat at Vatopade Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece, in the Spring of 2000 Monk Matthew said: "In view of your teaching pastoral care why don't you examine the works of the Church Fathers (and Church Mothers) in providing a theory for Spiritual Care?" In this writing I am attempting to rise to this challenge.

I think my answer in the "So what?" inquiry is found in finding an application for the question for Wholeness/Holiness in our Wesleyan tradition as it is related to its roots in the writings of the Church Fathers. I admit that in exploring these ancient Syriac writings I have become "Orthodox in heart" (a phrase applied to those who seek to appropriate the Spiritual Writings of the early Eastern Church Fathers). What is at stake is re-examining how we in the Western Church have been sometimes trapped in Augustinian theology and/or Hellenistic philosophy mingled with Christian theology which views the human condition differently. There is a lot of similarities between Syriac Christian Spirituality and Wesleyan emphasis on Holiness or Perfect Love.

A basis for further study can be in pursuing a statement made by Sebastian Brock: "The poet Ephrem (c.306-73) is the finest representative of Syriac symbolic theology and its pre-monastic Spirituality." (23) It may be that the interests of persons like S T Kimbrough and Kathleen McVey can spark others interest about further in depth examinations of the relevance of St. Ephrem to 21st century ministry as a part of the New Creation.

Right here in Oxford, England, Sebastian Brock continues his interest in the theology of Saint Ephrem. Randy Maddox, one of the Plenary Speakers at this Institute has had a great interest in John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy. He sees the essence of the church to be community, togetherness. This needs to be explored further in terms of Practical Theology. He cites Wesley as referring to Saint Ephrem as the "most awakening author of all the ancients, . . . and he was Wesley's favorite such author." (24)

The last linkage in this discussion is from Kenneth Paul Wesche, an Orthodox Priest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who in his writings advocates that: "Union with God is the goal of theosis and the content of salvation." (25) It is through dying with Christ we are raised in newness of life. This is indeed the New Creation. More work needs to be done on this theme to develop an adequate Practical Theology.

"Theosis does not imply the destruction or absorption of the self but its transformation, its purification, its illumination and restoration to the purity of its 'primary substance,' the being made in the icon of God..." (26)

Summary

As I review the massive literature in Syriac, Slavonic, and Wesleyan Spirituality I am reminded of what I saw as an Irish Prayer used to cover the valves on a two person experimental submarine. It said, "O Lord, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small."

We have a rich Wesleyan heritage which I am reexamining through the eyes of Syriac Spirituality. John Wesley's reading of Ephrem the Syriac's writings at 57 settings with Sophia

Hopkey in Georgia along with other behaviors open to speculation only seemed to push her into marriage with another. Was that experience responsible for Wesley's aversion to further serious application of Syriac spirituality to his intended renewal movement with Anglicanism? In the words of the apostle Paul, "You did run well but what has hindered you?" He spent a lot of time laying groundwork by utilizing both tradition and experience from his own expression of Spirituality.

The scholarly meetings and applications of the principles learned from exploring our Syriac theological heritage which can be very productive for theory building in Practical Theology. Considerable work still needs to be done on identifying how the New Creation can come about by identifying both the roots and the wild branches of our heritage from the Scriptures and from the Traditions of the Eastern Church Fathers and Mothers. This heritage figures into our task in ministry. I close by commending S T Kimbrough for the marvelous compiling work resulting from the Consultation on Orthodoxy on Wesleyan Spirituality in 1999. Kimbrough deserves the last word: "There is a strong presence of the spirituality of the early Church fathers in the writing and practice of the Wesleys. . . one will find here foundation stones for building bridges of understanding and the deepening of spirituality in one's journey with Christ and the Church." (27) It seems this is what Christian Spiritual Care is all about.

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