

Theology worked out from and for Life: Wesley's "Practical Christianity"

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I. Wesleyan uneasiness: turn into practice

1. Why did Wesley not opt for a respectable and calm academic life? Although Wesley oscillated between a contemplative life and an active life, the latter characterized his existence. He and his brother were threatened by an internal and individualistic mystic but, after being advised by "a serious man", he chose for a "social religion", "the only religion the Bible knows". Since then they understood that faith can be "a comprehensive practice" and theology is better as "practical Christianity". The Wesleyan spirituality is essentially modern, and "life" is active life (*vita activa*). It was the existential uneasiness that led him to a situation that could not be purely satisfied neither by the academic life nor the contemplative life. Faith becomes a vital struggle. It was not a question of intellectual dissatisfaction for him. According to Wesley, the issue touches the practical life, the concrete life, the life that needs to be transformed. This was a concern that went against the existing intellectual trends within university. The times were subjected to rationalism and empiricism, and everything should be submitted to reason as the power that controls life. The theological Enlightenment era, as an integration of Theology with science, metaphysics had free course in the academy, but he turned the way of salvation into a determinant subject into his life. Wesley's influences turn around around this vital assumption.

Wesley's theology can be read in reference to acknowledged influences: the Greek or Latin fathers, the Puritanism, the empiricism, the mystics, the pietism, etc. However, as we understand them, the main factor that motivated Wesley to explore these sources can be summarized by the existential question about *the way of salvation*. All his theology

turned around this question.¹ The main issue to Wesley was how to save his life and how to live a sanctified life; a horizon controlled by a clear decision in taking the Bible as normative. In order of understanding Wesley's theology we need start with life, not with a conceptual frame be it grace or whatever.

Many studies on Wesley seem to give more attention to the external influences than to the central motivation of his life. He cannot be fully understood only in light of his influences. The empirical trend attributing everything to a external cause suggests that the overwhelming influence of his parents, or the puritan environment, the fathers of the Church, the reformers, the pietism, or any another influence "explains" his theological frame. In fact, *the central point is the radical search of Wesley for a way of salvation of its soul*, a very existential turning point as the powerful epicenter of subsequent developments. *Life* is the starting point and ultimate point of Wesleyan theology that opens the horizon to understand the contributions of Wesley to theology: sanctification, Christian perfection, experience. His theology of grace is cut as clothes to wear the real life profile as concretely lived. We are pressed into *life as our ground for an experiential faith and theology*. The uneasiness in Wesley's life could not rest without a way of transformation. He was a *cor inquietum*. The mode of Christian living, as presented by the Anglican Church, enthusiastic groups, dissenting churches, Calvinists or Lutherans, did not fulfill his needs. Wesley could not give up the praxis of salvation.

2. The academic theology in the 18th century presented clear signals of a new bourgeois spirit forged in the furnace of the Enlightenment and industrial progress; here, the religious experience started to give the first steps towards privatization. If the 17th century was "the century of the Bible" (as described by Christopher Hill) in England, the 18th century was the century when religious privatization begun. Wesley was in the crossing roads that looked at religion as a private subject, and a tradition that saw religion as a public matter. The Wesleyan vision fortifies the personal dimension of the faith, but pre-

¹ Undoubtedly he was marked by a certain mystique as he himself reported in his *Journals*, initially as *mistica contemplativa*, and later, as the *mistica moderna*. The abridged volumes of mystic literature which he included in the *Christian Library* are evidence of such influence.

serves its public dimension as one of its essential aspects. The Wesleyan gospel is public and personal.

Our approach looks at Wesleyan theology from his existential pre-comprehension and only secondarily explains it in the light of its influences. However, we cannot pull out him of the time. Wesley was not immune to the Enlightenment's environment. Philosophically he was an empiricist, as his theory of the knowledge based on the physical organs reveals. He was also influenced by Locke in his theory of science. He was formed in a spirit of religious tolerance in times of intolerance. He gave great emphasis to the personal subjectivity (religion of the heart), but did not cease to balance it with a social aspect, external life, actions, in sum, the practical life of Christianity. This return to life and subjectivity seems to me a fundamental step.

Wesley is very distant from the subjectivism, the religious experience privatization or the bourgeois tendency to deal with the religion as a private sphere. Despite of it he cultivated what we could call a "Biblical Enlightenment" (a belief of that the Bible contains a Christian philosophy and that its principles are enough to shed light on eventualities and practical questions of life). Bible is central in life for Wesley. Wesley preaches, thinks and lives with the Biblical text, weaving Word of God and praxis. ²

In this essay we argue that Wesley must primarily be understood in light of life concretely lived, and that the modern *devotio moderna* helped him to forge a living Christianity not limited to the academy, and in opposition to all form of Christianity which was not concerned with practical sanctity. Life, for him, was a relationship with the world reflecting our relationship with God. Life means one fabric of beliefs, feelings, habits, ac-

² He was prisoner of a mitigate Biblical fundamentalism -- more or less as Bengel was. We have some indications that Wesley defended a Biblical enlightenment and the possibility of writing a Biblical philosophy or a "divine philosophy". This is clear in the Sermons, e.g. in the Sermon on the Mount. However, he was disappointed with the attempts of a philosophy inspired by the Bible like Böhme's or Oetinger's. A more recent attempt, very next to that of Wesley's, was carried out by the first Stanley Jones in his book *Christ on the Mount. The Working Philosophy of Life*. In a similar spirit to Wesley's he writes: "Now, for many Christians the orthodoxy of the creed is seen as more essential than that orthopraxy of actions."

tion, attitudes, relationships, which bring us near or away from God. This is clearly an Augustinian view.³ Certainly, Wesley finds some inspiration in Christian fathers, although this is not the central motivation. The Christian and Biblical way of salvation seems to be the dynamic and forming center of his theology. The influences offer a background, important and necessary for interpretation, but they do not explain the more central aspect of his theology. In order to understand the practical Christianity we should depart from a more vital and existential content than a set of influences. Wesley's theology is worked out from the lived world and from praxis. Our reading suggests that this is a better way to understand the Wesleyan practical Christianity, his practical theology, and the place of experience in the Wesleyan way of doing theology.⁴ Wesley did theology *in via*, on foot, like a pilgrim, living with the people, not from the balcony (according to MacKay's metaphor).

II. The place of experience in the thought of John Wesley

3. The experience can well be understood in the Wesleyan thought in correlation with the concerns of developing salvation and sanctity as concrete life. We can speak of praxis of salvation. Wesley introduced praxis of sanctity as essential to salvation and theology. This practical engagement concern was regrettably misinterpreted as theological shallowness.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral represents an advance in relation to the Trilateral source of theological authority developed within the Anglicanism (following Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Laws* in the 16th century), as Wesley's approach incorporates experience as a source for theology. Experience, however, can have multiple meanings. An important aspect is, without a doubt, the personal dimension, even if it does not give a full account of

³ "Whereas we are every hour and every minute pleasing or displeasing to God according to our works." Minutes of Conference of 1770.

⁴ See Renders, Helmut. John Wesley's social soteriology: with special consideration of its communitarian, synergetic and public aspects. Sao Bernardo do Campo, SP, 2006. 404f. Thesis (Doctor Degree in Religious Studies - Theology and History) – Methodist University of Sao Paulo, 2006, p. 148-204, who suggests that especially the contact with the lifeworld of the common people and the poor transformed Wesley's soteriology in a social soteriology, *ad populum*, *ad pauperum* and *ad vitam*.

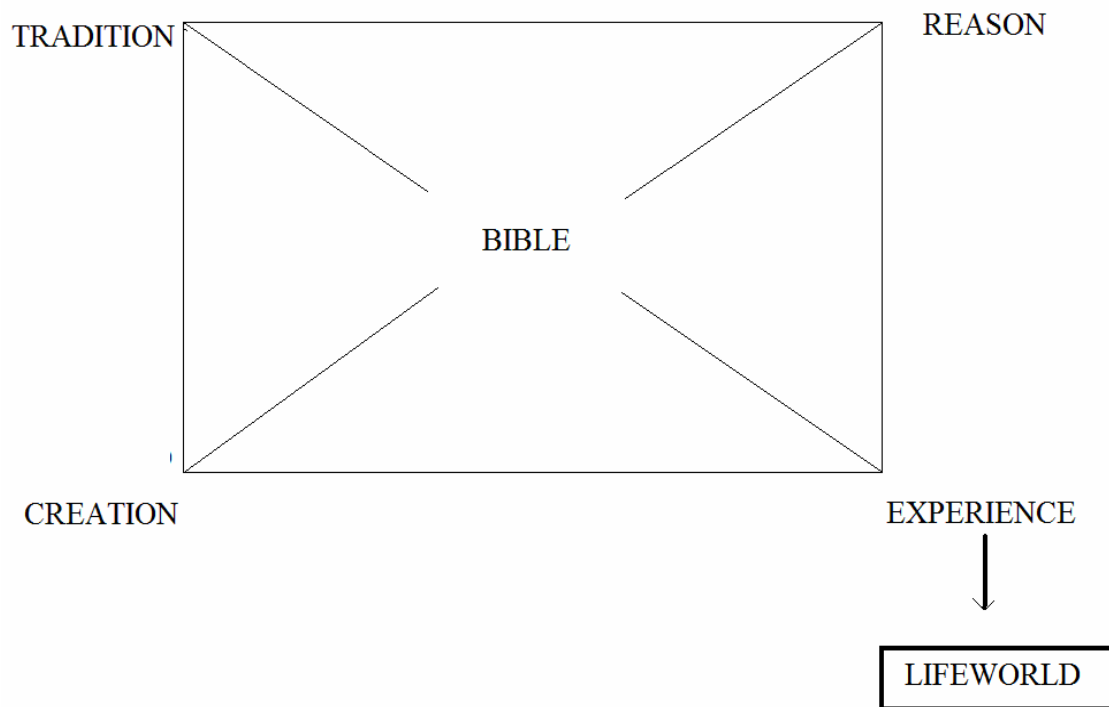
Wesley's theological elaboration. We need to extend the sphere of experience to understand it as used by Wesley and, at the same time, to make it relevant in our days. We can make it very close to the contemporary idea of "Lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*, as developed by phenomenological method after Husserl)⁵ as the ground of our thought and action; or, more directly, the thought of Wesley is not contented with the abstract system, it needs to seize the concrete/practical life. Lifeworld is the ground of our experience or the pre-reflexive condition for our whole life. Experience and lifeworld becomes the essential link to the living life, and therefore essential source for theology as such. Trough out our experience we are embedded in the lifeworld.⁶

A contextual "practical theology" in Brazil received a good contribution from an unexpected and non-academic source: the poor and lay people from the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. The Wesleyan quadrilateral developed in Dr. Outler's work was modified by the living experience of those people. Laypeople from a Methodist community suggested, while reading the Compendium of Wesleyan theology by Burtner and Chiles, a new and consistent arrangement for the quadrilateral: the Bible could be moved to the center of the geometric figure (as the right place for it according the Wesleyan thought); "creation" would have to occupy the missing corner left by the Bible. With such a change it was re-affirmed the centrality of the Bible in Wesley's thought. Additionally the changes offered a review providing a place to things of the nature and the importance Wesley gave to our

⁵ On the *Lebenswelt*: Husserl developed this notion in his last works (the *Krisis* period) and manuscripts after 1920. *Lebenswelt* is concept widely used in science (not only in humanities). This idea allows us talk about the universal and common ground of our experience as well as our specific and particular worlds. We live in a world signifying it in different levels. We interpret it trough our existence in the world. Action and reflection brings into being the meaning world. *Lebenswelt* and hermeneutics are intrinsically correlated. The world is the ultimate remission and the *Lebenswelt* forms our horizon of meanings as a necessary concrete and historic a priori as pre-comprehension that makes possible our discourse. It is for us the ground that articulates all human experience and its modes of expression. Our experience has meaning as part of this vital word as everyday life, as corporeality, as social and intersubjective life, and all products of human creation as science and theology. To live in the meaningful world is our original experience and our "incarnation". The world that comes to language is our living world. Through the vital world or the lifeworld we are a conscious I as presence in our speech, presence in our action, presence in face of ourselves.

⁶ For a very interesting approach of the Lifeworld in theological method see Härle, Gottfried, *Dogmatik*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1995 (719p), Chapter 6 : "Die gegenwärtige Lebenswelt als Kontext des Christlichen Glaubens", p. 168-192 . The Lifeworld is a more comprehensive concept to understand the horizon of the whole life from culture, language, history, tradition powers, temporal and spatial injunctions, the intentional body (Leib), as well as our everyday life: faith is incarnated faith and living faith as it was Jesus Christ incarnated in his specific Lifeworld.

natural experience. Experience is our link with the lifeworld. Thus the quadrilateral used by some groups in Latin America can be represented as follows:



Wesley's greatest innovation as far as the Anglican trilateral is concerned is the understanding of experience as a theological source and authority. This innovation means that the Bible supplies the horizon and norm while life is the practical ground to walk and think as *in via*. Without this vital ground we mislead ourselves into ideological abstractions, we create worlds without roots. The experience must include all dimensions of experience, providing significations for our personal and social life. Wesley placed the experience as a constant source of interaction with other theological foundations. Wesley's theological turning point is marked by a horizon of significant experiences for all people, especially the poor. The Wesleyan theology develops itself around the praxis of salvation. The experience does not get lost within the modern subjectivism and individualism. The narrative-practical theology of Wesley is soteriological and social from the beginning, and experience must give a sure account of it.

III. *Theologia ex vita deducta*: approaches on Wesley's "practical Christianity"

4. To understand the "practical Christianity" we need to think beyond pragmatism, and avoid the confusion with what is presently called Pastoral Theology or a way of actually doing what we have in mind or in our heart.

Outler describes John Wesley as a "folk theologian". There is no need to draw upon the miscomprehensions that this expression generated. For example, it is a mistake to interpret Wesley cannot be understood as folk theologian signifying do not fulfill the requirements of academic theology.

Frank Baker wrote an interesting article, "Practical Divinity - John Wesley's Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism"⁷ (1987), where he interprets the "Practical Divinity" as follows: "Theology is always colored by human experience, and usually derived from meditation and closely thought upon it. Particular Wesley's brand of theology was avowedly and inextricably interwoven with human experience. Practical divinity was that branch of theology which dealt specially with the Creator's interactions with the creatures made in His image." After analyzing a series of examples he adds: "This, then, was the doctrinal agenda of Methodism, the study of sin, repentance, faith, works, assurance, justification, sanctification, and to their links with Christian living. This was Practical Divinity." The salvation must be experimental, and so must be the sanctification. Wesley places himself in the great tradition of the religion of the heart, and his life echoes the Church father's tradition ("God made practical divinity necessary, the devil controversial").

Randy Maddox answered Baker's article in "John Wesley: Practical Theologian"⁸ (1988). For Maddox, Baker's reply to Outler remains insufficient. Analyzing the effective conceptions in the 19th century, he enumerates the following alternatives: 1. "Theology *per se* as practical"; 2. "Practical Theology as Spiritual Devotional Theology"; 3. "Practical Theology as Non-Technical Theology" 4. "Practical Theology as Moral Theology"; 5. "Practical Theology as *Glaubenslehre*". Maddox accurately argues for the necessity to

⁷ Baker, Frank, in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, v. 22, n. 1, 1987.

⁸ Maddox, R., in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, v. 23, n. 1-2, Spring-Fall, 1988.

surpass any attempt to understand “practical Christianity” as Pastoral Theology. He asks: which would be today the desirable characteristics in a practical theology as a whole? And Maddox answers: it would have to be transformative, holistic, it would have to recognize the praxis priority within the theological method, therefore it would have to be contextual, and, finally, it would not have to be programmatically and an abstract system, but it should look at the demands of the historical situation.

Maddox approach is an analysis of the possible meanings for the expression in focus, and his thesis is the following: “Having suggested the inadequacy of the other identifications of practical theology as characterizations of Wesley's overall theology, we come to our main thesis: When his work is considered as a whole, Wesley’s theological activity is analogous to the early church approach to theology per se as practical endeavor.” The argument is founded in the analysis of the styles and literary forms of Wesley’s theological production. Practical theology does not fit in any of the types of the known practical theology of his time or today’s. On the other hand Wesley do theology correlating contemporary’s concrete lifeworld as an authentic practical theology: transformative, holistic, giving priority to the praxis, and contextual background.

5. An another contribution came from Professor Robert Cushman in his book on *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity*⁹ (1989), where “experimental divinity” is given as synonymous for “Scripture way of salvation”. The argument of Cushman is based on the principle that the central Wesleyan motivation (governing motivation) is salvation. This motivation implies a deep conscience of the sin. Theology establishes, from the Holy Scripture, the road the pilgrim must follow. But the route can be delineated only in conjunction of the Word and practice. Here the Spanish poet Antonio Machado’s saying is helpful “el camino se hace al caminar” (“we see the path by walking”). Wesley seems to say in his sermons that authentic faith is not only faith in religious articles, but is living faith or none. “True Faith” is that one in which we walk, in which we live, where we produce abundant love, works, assurance, and a new life. Cushman summarizes his interpretation in the following way: “The core of the Wesleyan teaching concerning `experimen-

⁹ Cushman, Robert, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity*, Kingwoods Books, Nashville, Tennessee, 1989.

tal and practical divinity' was an understanding of the 'scripture way of salvation' as *conditional*. On the one hand, this was justification or forgiveness of sins by grace through received faith; on the other hand, the 'new birth' carried with it life vocation, namely Christian perfection, inward and outward, holiness an inescapable obligation. Together, these constitute 'the ordinary condition of salvation.' Yet always Wesley teaches this is God's doing by his preventing and saving grace. Wesley is saying: we are not saved without ourselves, as Augustine had long before declared. Such is the constellation of events which, in the Wesleyan view, makes up the eventfulness of the Christian life and Christianity as 'experimental religion'¹⁰. It is interesting to notice that Cushman gives emphasis to the conditional character of the grace and to the idea of the Christian perfection as being both fully understandable only in the context of the active life. Furthermore the sanctification idea is not an esoteric idea or of supernatural infusion. It is by walking in grace that the nature of theology and the true faith can be defined.

An older but more inclusive approach was written by Thomas Langford, in his work *Practical Divinity. Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*¹¹ (1983). His interpretation is repeated in another book on *Methodist Theology*¹² (1998). For this author the theology in the Wesleyan spirit is never an end in itself, but always a discourse for the practical transformation of life. Doing theology is developed in a living tradition where the theological discourse itself is transformed. This pushes Wesleyan theology beyond Wesley. Theology is a discourse that cannot be far from the conditions for transformation of personal, communitarian, institutional and social life. We cannot do theology thinking that we can apply it after. Doing theology is in itself a transforming act. Langford clarifies that the experience is not a primary source of theological direction, as it is the Scriptures for example, but it is an essential correlation for theology and contextualization of the Word. The experience is not by itself an authorized source for theology. In the second cited book, Langford summarizes his understanding of the "practical theology" in Wesley: "Wesley's theology, then, is practical *in nature and in intention*. It grew out of practice, was reflec-

¹⁰ Op. Cit., p. 48.

¹¹ Langford, Thomas – *Practical Divinity. Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1983.

¹² Langford, Thomas – *Methodist Theology*, Epworth Press, Peterborough, 1988.

tion upon practice, and aimed you enhance practice. It was for the shaping of life, and he rightly called it 'Practical Divinity'. The method of such a theology is important. Wesley does not establish theory, and then apply it in practice. Rather, for him, interpretation arises from life situations and then rebounds to help shape a new engagement with life. Knowing the truth of faith is possible to give testimony of the truth, and knowing the truth reinforces doing the truth. For John Wesley, therefore, theology derives both from Christian experience and sustains Christian experience. Practice and theory are held inseparably together. Each needs the other, and each enriches the other. Moreover, practical theology, as Wesley understood it, is not identical with applicability, accommodation or sheer pragmatism. It has to do rather with theology belonging not to an elite but to the whole church, and shaping life not according to the dominant cultural patterns but in distinctively Christian ways. This original meaning should be born in mind, in part a corrective to later interpretations.”¹³

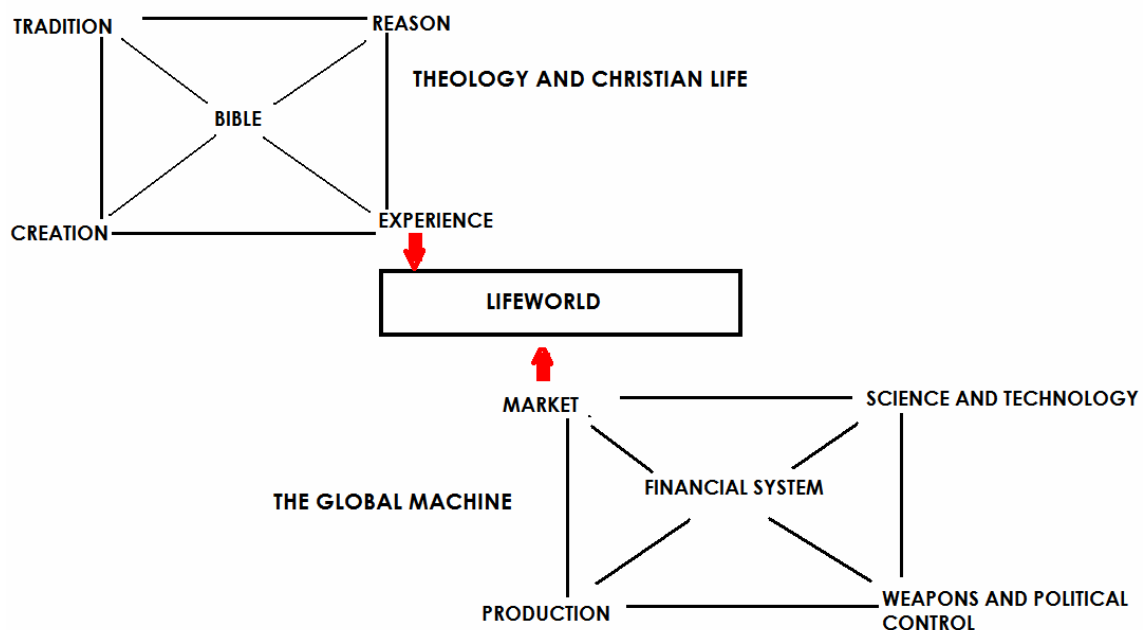
Cushman's and Langford's interpretations describe more accurately the sense of “practical Christianity” as incarnation in life. This precondition makes the reading of the fathers highly selective, as it is for the mystic texts which are selected and abbreviated by practical and theological criteria, as the puritans are read and criticized in a new perspective. Theology cannot be practiced by its own sake. Wesley did not made theology for theologians, but theology for the full life. It must be interlaced with life and be soteriologically guided.¹⁴ Christian perfection and theosis appears in the core of life as praxis of salvation or as an imperative of transformation. This was the motivation and uneasiness of Wesley for transformation, metamorphosis experienced by grace. Some of the practical and more inclusive aspirations of the people for grounded theology are raised by Wesley as a *sine qua non* condition for doing theology.

¹³ Langford, Thomas – *Methodist Theology*, Epworth Press, Peterborough, 1988, p. 3-4.

¹⁴ In his thesis Helmut Renders suggests that we should read all of Wesley's theology as soteriological, as soteriological Christology, pneumatology, anthropology, eschatology and ecclesiology and that it is framed by his soteriological anthropology and – often forgotten – eschatology.

IV. Practical Christianity and Bourgeois Spirituality

6. The economic social life was transformed by the intense globalization in a product of a “New Leviathan” (named in this paper the *global machine*) with its five pillars, 1) the international financial system, 2) the global market, 3) the science and technology, 4) the production and 5) weapons and political control. In this globalized world, the privatization of the religion (as initiated in the 18th century), reaches an extreme point. Privatization of the religious experience in the global machine consists, perhaps, one of the crucial challenges faced by contemporary Christianity. Christianity risks become a mere administrator of private experiences. Many aspects of the public life have been privatized; and some aspects of the private life have become public; it depends on the benefits for the market. Since religion became a private subject some institutions became specialized in offering new forms of this experience and administrate it as company or business. Religious institutions are threatened by models of private companies dedicated to the administration of the experience with God. The global machine incorporates the religious dimension as a commodity. So we can have a conflict between the message of the Christian gospel and the messages or gospels of the global machine:



This conflict between the gospel message and practice and the global machine's gospel and practice happens in the ground of life or the lifeworld. Wesley's conception of "practical Christianity" and "experience" is contrary to the dominion of the ground of life and the privatization of religion. According to Wesley, the experience of a scriptural way of salvation is possible only if we imagine a new personal life as part of a social religion, with its public implications (socially prophetic) and new communitarian relationships. Personal salvation is also social salvation. And personal relationships are important for a conscientiously public dimension of faith and church mission. In the core of the global machine Christ's gospel concurs with many others "machine's gospels". This machine is an inventor of dreams; machine of empty desires and hopes, machine of luxury, undisputed force to dominate and destroy as well as it is a creator of false necessities and false ideals of life, blessed by the market's god. This machine preaches gospels of happiness by its sole instrumentality, at same time predestining, excluding and promoting suffering with an unimagined cruelty. In the private/public polarity, bourgeois subjectivity is privileged by the machine with virtual worlds. "Private" became a central concept of bourgeois subjectivity. The confusion of virtual possibilities of the machine with the real life has been fatal for the theology.

The bourgeois way of living became standard for all the ways to conquest and success. The bourgeois machine imposes itself as a much more strong force than any modern state. The world became a set of relations determined by the machine's ideals, and existence is measured by the success in adapting to such a life. This is exactly the opposite meaning which Wesley credit to the world as a complex of existential human relationships. Religious experience must not satisfy the requirements of the profit to get relevance. The bourgeois state privatized religion and emptied the relationships based on solidarity. The religion enters in the market mechanism to be managed as an individual consumption good. Following this description religious experience is becoming hostage of the global machine.

7. Does the theological perspective of Wesley have enough resources and horizon to make Christian religious experience resistant to the machine's gospels? Do we have in

our lived world and in our Wesleyan and Biblical tradition resources for a renewal? A conflict can be raised from the theological understanding of the experience, and from what Wesley assigned to practical Christianity: the power of the global machine transmute religious experience into accommodation to market values. The religious experience today tends to be reduced to individual consumption and operates as a motivation for other individual experiences in a vicious circle of dependence. Salvation experience in the Wesleyan sense is rooted in the real and total ground of reality concretely articulated with life. The narrative-practical theology constitutes the memory of a liberating experience, subversion and resistance memory in opposition to all other alternative gospels. The way of salvation is not an abstract but a real doing alongside the suffering and those on the margins of society. This way does not start real in Jesus and finishes in the machine of virtual dreams.

What Wesley considers is a narrative-practical theology that gives priority to the lived ground of the concrete people in relation to the redemption of life. The ideas of God, Christ, Spirit are not concepts, but they are practical ideas proved in life. The experience and the praxis are fundamental for what is called true faith. The message incarnates in word and lives; life certifies the word and word brings sense to life. There is intestine conflict between a theology that incarnates salvation in the concrete life, followers of Christ in the way, and life as preached by the market. The question is terribly aggravated when we are conscious that the global machine has its “practical theology”: the machine’s gospel interlaces directly its message with happiness here and now; it promises easiness in a very seductive way; the authentic gospel of Christ is uneasiness in the world. *Churches are tempted to reduce their task to managing a religious experience of individuals in order to make life much easier.* We can see the emergence of sophisticate messages trying to make the gospel an instrument of success in the world. An example of this, not the only one of this kind, is the prosperity theology of our times.

In conclusion we may summarize the conflict between faith and the global machine as a struggle between “principalities and powers”¹⁵ in the lifeworld arena and we can have

¹⁵ The primitive church context was a world of powers and principalities, historical and spiritual; the Christians communities had scarce possibilities against them except by faith and Christ’s power. Biblical and ex-

types of theology (and evangelization) that are functional with the global machine, those that are focus of resistance in the interior of the machine (like de Certeau's tactics¹⁶), and those which are in open conflict looking for more radical changes.

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tra-biblical sources are abundant. See Schlier, Heinrich, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, Herder, 1960.

¹⁶ He calls a "strategy" the *calculus* of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research. Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. He calls "tactic," on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. "Tactics" is used by Certeau to mean "the art of the weak" and allow us the "art of pulling tricks" and to manage situations and power relations that threatens our lives by occupying places not used by institutional power taking advantage of more dynamics possibilities.