

John Wesley's Missiology: A Review of Moravian Contributions

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Methodism has long been known for a rich tradition of missions. Today Methodism exists in 132 countries around the world and missionaries continue to be sent to open new churches in places like Cambodia, Honduras, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Nepal, Russia, Senegal. Just recently missionaries have been commissioned to Thailand and Laos. But where did this rich tradition of mission work begin? Did John Wesley have a hand in beginning a Methodist tradition of foreign missions? We have all heard John Wesley's oversimplified and misinterpreted quote: "The world is my parish," but was this a call to world missions? The traditions that most influenced Wesley's view on missions were the Church of England, the Puritans, the Pietists from Halle, the Roman Catholics and the Moravians. The first four traditions influenced Wesley's decision to go to Georgia and his early missiology. Yet on the voyage and during the next five years of his life, the Moravians would influence not only his missiology, but his personal, professional and spiritual life. This paper will examine the Moravians' background and unique contribution to modern missions, as well as their influence on Wesley. In spite of their influence on his personal, professional and spiritual life, this paper will argue that the Moravians' foreign missions program did not have a lasting effect on Wesley and therefore was not the precursor of Methodist foreign missions—at least not directly so.

Throughout Wesley's journey to Savannah, his relationship to the Moravians and the early years of the Methodist movement, the thread that links Wesley's missiology is a drive to replicate primitive Christianity.

The story of Moravian missions emerges out of their past with another set of origins. Influenced by the writings of John Wycliffe and the Waldensian Church, the young Jan Hus (1373-1415) headed a reform movement at Charles University in Prague. He was ex-communicated by the Pope in 1411 and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415 for criticizing corruption, indulgences, one substance of communion and reciting mass and Scriptures in his native Bohemian. His martyrdom became entwined in Bohemian nationalism and pre-reformation humanist claims giving birth to two Husite movements: the Taborites and the Utraquists. While the former had more radical demands and left the Catholic Church, the latter (from the Latin *sub utraque specie* meaning "of both kinds") remained with the Catholic structure struggling for Eucharist reform and eventually evolving into the Moravian Church.¹

The *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren) were founded on March 1, 1457 in Kunwald, Bohemia. Later calling themselves Moravians for their native land of Moravia, the group maintained friendly relations with Martin Luther during the episcopacies of Jan Augusta and Jan Blahoslav (1523-1571). The Moravian Church was ecumenical (Martin Luther wrote favorably about them) but had their own unique polity. They had dioceses, abandoned clerical celibacy and had a Reformed understanding of baptism and the Eucharist.

¹ *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, vol.10, 1987, p.106.

After Protestant forces were defeated in battle during the Thirty Year War (1618-1648) in what is today the Czech Republic and a period of oppression began for Protestants in Bohemia and Moravia. The Brethren were only able to survive through secret meetings and the inability of the government officials to enforce conformity. Contact with Lutherans across the border helped to sustain morale and some Moravians crossed into Germany. Originally they expected to return home, but then realized that they needed to stay longer and built a more permanent community. One of the saviors of the persecuted Moravians was a young German count who heard their plea and offered his estate as a place of refuge.

Nicholas von Zinzendorf

Nicholas von Zinzendorf was the only son born to a wealthy royal couple, Ludwig von Zinzendorf and Charlotte Justine of Dresden, Germany. Nicolas' grandfather was Henriette Catherine von Gersorf, an extraordinary woman who was visited frequently by Philip Jacob Spener and Hermann Francke and hosted a *colegio pietatis* (covenant discipleship group) in her home. In fact, Spener was the godfather of young Nicolas.

In spite of Zinzendorf's pietist pedigree and his childhood studies at Halle, he became disillusioned with the pietists and at the age of 16 transferred to the University of Wittenberg and became Lutheran. After completing his studies he married Erdmuth Dorothea Reuss, a countess who also had royal ties and pietist connections to Halle. Then he purchased the Berthelsdorf Estate from his grandmother with enough land to build a community about a mile from the local parish church.

When Zinzendorf asked Rothe to be the pastor at Berthelsdorf, the parish located a mile from Zinzendorf's Estate, he learned of the plight of the Moravians. Rothe had met Christian David and recommended him to Zinzendorf. Christian David recalls:

After my return from my third journey Count Zinzendorf sent to Görlitz, the minister of Berthelsdorf being dead, for Mr. Rothe, who was in a gentleman's family there, to be minister of that place. Mr. Rothe told him of me, and he writ to me to come to him. And when I came said, 'Let as many as will of your friends come hither; I will give them land to build on, and Christ will give the rest.' I went immediately into Moravia and told them God had now found out a place for us. Ten of them followed me then; ten more the next year; one more in my following journey. The Papists were now alarmed, set a price upon my head, and levelled the house I had lodged in, even with the ground. I made however eleven journeys thither in all, and conducted as many as desired it to this place, the way to which was now so well known that many more came of themselves.²

Christian David arrived at Zinzendorf's estate with the first 10 refugees on May 27, 1722.

A carpenter by trade, Christian David and the Moravians brought labor that Zinzendorf did not hesitate to harness. They built an orphanage, but when the number of refugees increased and they realized that their stay was more permanent, it was converted into an orphanage which was the beginning of Herrnhut, meaning the "Lord's Watch." The community continued to grow spiritually and numerically and by May of 1725 there were 90 refugees at Herrnhut including Lutherans, Calvinists, Moravians and other enthusiasts.³

The year 1727 was to a key year for the revival of Herrnhut. The "Banden" or bands emerged on February 8, 1727 following frequent conferences for prayer and

² Journal, August 10, 1738.

³ Taylor and Kenneth Hamilton, History of the Moravian Church, Interprovincial Board of Christian Education, Moravian Church in America, Winston-Salem, 1967, p.29.

intimate discussion of personal experiences.⁴ Zinzendorf imported the idea of covenant discipleship groups from Spener's *colegio pietatis*. The small groups were part of a larger re-structuring effort in which Zinzendorf assumed direct responsibilities for Herrnhut. More than structure, the emergence of the bands was part of Zinzendorf's theology of the heart. He stressed religious feeling (*gefühl*) and experience over dogma and doctrinal uniqueness. Herrnhut grew significantly in 1727 and by the end of the year there were 34 buildings and 300 people at Herrnhut—half of them from Moravia. Between 1727 and 1734 more immigrants would arrive from Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, as well as nearby Saxony and the population would double to 600 people.

Having read about the pietist mission work in India and the terrible condition of slaves in the Caribbean, Count Zinzendorf made arrangements for Anthony, an ex-slave from the island of St. Thomas, to come and speak to the Herrnhutters. In spite of Anthony's forewarnings that their presence would be misunderstood by both the slaves and plantation owners, more than 600 people felt the call to support the missionary work. This marked a new trend in missions that some scholars have called the dawning of the modern missionary era. Namely, ordinary lay people engaging in foreign missions without the support of a head of state, order or trading company. Zinzendorf started teaching courses in geography, writing, medicine and theology to prepare the willing volunteers. Moravian bishop and historian Kenneth Hamilton wrote: “[The Lord] used these humble refugees to demonstrate again that the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

After a period of preparation Moravian missionaries, Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann, set sail for St. Thomas on October 8, 1732 to minister to the slave

⁴ *Ibid*, p.32.

community. As expected the plantation owners were perplexed, at best, by the presence of the white missionaries and earning the trust of the slaves was slow. The men were hired as night watchmen to earn their keep and have contact with the slaves

By the time the Wesley brothers boarded the Symmonds in 1735 Moravian mission work were in full bloom—having spread to St. Croix and with plans to extend to St. John’s, St. Croix, Greenland, Surinam, South Africa, the Gold Coast, Algeria, and Artic Russia. In all 26 Herrnhutters went out as missionaries—not including those who moved permanently to the colonies in Savannah and Bethlehem to settle. Therefore when Wesley started his friendship with the Moravians, he would have learned about the depth of their missionary activities. The Moravians frequently read a letter or testimony during their love-feasts, which were introduced to Wesley during his time with them in Georgia.⁵ In addition, his Savannah journal of March of 1737 records his reading the Danish missionary work in India.⁶

18th Century Models of Missions

Of course this was not Wesley’s first introduction to foreign missions. There were four main missionary models of which Wesley was aware before he met the Moravians: the English society model, the Puritans immigration model, the Danish Pietist model from Halle and the Roman Catholic model sponsored by the Spanish crown. As a boy Wesley was aware of his father Samuel’s participation in the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) which was founded in 1698 to "counteract the growth of vice and immorality" through the publication of Christian literature.

⁵ Works VIII, Record 68:208

⁶ The missionary accounts were probably from Ziegengalg, Bartholomaeus. *Propagation of the Gospel in the East*, London, J. Downing 1711.

Concerned that the SPCK was not providing enough support for Thomas Bray and other religious efforts in North America, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in Foreign Parts founded in 1701 to "ensure that sufficient mainteynance [sic] be provided for an orthodox clergy to live amongst the colonists and that such other provision be made as may be necessary for the propagation of the gospel in those parts..." The original work of the SPG was ruled by the English Crown to provide religious services to the colonists.⁷ While Wesley would have been keenly aware of this English model, he found their mission philosophy heavily centered on the love and wisdom of the missionary as pastor and teacher.⁸ This model takes the responsibility off the ordinary laymen to participate in missions and appoints a designated religious leader to the colonists. This model became problematic as the colonists, as representatives of Christian nations, mistreated Native Americans, blacks and Indians making building trust difficult for missionaries:

“The scandalous and corrupted life of the Christians, dealing with, and residing among these many years past. The daily sight they have of their disorders and impiety, of the lust and gluttony, of their vanity and love of pleasure, of their greedy and insatiable avarios, of their pride and insolency, of their cunning, of the fraud in their employments, trade and occupations, of the slight they put upon their own God and religion, of their ridiculing of everything sacred; in a word: the sight they have of the earthly mindedness of Christians is so great of an obstacle as lyeth altogether out of reach of me to removed. ‘Til this deluge of wicknessness whereby the name of Christ is becoming a stench in the nostrils of the heathen, and which is not worn off, but by a contrary practice of a more heavenly life and conversation.”⁹

Wesley learned about these problems first hand while in Savannah as his efforts to preach to Native Americans were frustrated. On one hand the behavior of the English colonists

⁷ The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Letter Books, 1701-1786, Collection 155.

⁸ Martin Schmidt, *The Young Wesley: Missionary and Theologian of Missions*, Epworth Press, 1958, p.24.

⁹ *Missionalia: or, a collection of missionary pieces relating to the conversion of the heathen; both the African negroes and American Indians*, London, 1727.

was not helpful for good will and Christian outreach. On the other hand, as the designed religious person, his parish duties were so cumbersome that on June 30, 1736 Governor James Oglethorpe prohibited his preaching excursions.

A second 18th century mission model was that of the Puritan Richard Sibbs and the early Puritan migrants who populated New England. Sibbs' missiology is derived from a literal interpretation of Scripture as the undisputed, established authority standing above all doctrines. As Puritans migrated to the New World their understanding of universal salvation history limited their outreach to Native Americans because of their Calvinistic understanding as the chosen people. Wesley's rejection of Puritan missiology demonstrated how he was a product of the modern age and broke from a literal interpretation of Scripture. Rather than an undisputed authority standing above all doctrines, Wesley saw Scripture from a more Anglican perspective of "containing all things necessary for salvation." Also, Wesley's missiology was more pragmatic and dialectical, seeking to recreate primitive Christianity.

The Danish Halle mission efforts became accessible in England following the publication of Bartholomeaus Ziegenbalg's *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* in 1711. Suzannah introduced the book to John and this model appealed to him as the missionary was more a servant of the Church and is aware of being dependent on the Holy Spirit. Although both Suzannah and Samuel were interested in missions, Samuel was more supportive of the English societies, as supported by the crown, while Suzanna preferred the model of persuasion. John would continue to read the continued reports of Danish missionary efforts as the *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* as sequels were

published. John recorded in his Savannah diary several instances of reading about the Danish missionaries—perhaps as provided by the Moravians.

Wesley was also aware of a fourth mission model as promoted by the Spanish crown. The Roman Catholic model was organized into religious orders, namely the Dominicans, Jesuits and Franciscan. Although Wesley enjoyed a positive view of some Spanish mystics who enjoyed a deep religious vocation and commitment to holiness, his view of the Spanish mission work was colored by his English colonial bias. Wesley's anti-Catholic views were evident in his recalling of his conversation with Chief Tomochichi in in 1735:

Saturday, February 14. About one Tomochichi, his nephew Toonahowi, his wife Sinauky, with two more women, and two or three Indian children, came on board. As soon as we came in they all rose, and shook us by the hand, and Tomochichi (one Mrs. Musgrove interpreted) spoke as follows: 'I am glad you are come. When I was in England I desired that some would speak the Great Word to me. And my nation then desired to hear it. But now we are all in confusion. Yet I am glad you are come. I will go up and speak to the wise men of our nation. And I hope they will hear. But we would not be made Christians as the Spaniards make Christians. We would be taught before we are baptized.'¹⁰

Wesley rejected the Catholic model of coercion and the English model as being too missionary-centered, however he embraced the Danish method as being spirit-led. Even before meeting the Moravians, Wesley had a working missiology and an open disposition toward the German pietism.

What is clear from this discussion is that at the time of his departure for Georgia as a missionary, John had a fully developed missiology. Given John Wesley's upbringing in a home where both his mother and his father had interest in missions, this is not surprising. Yet his views were highly theoretical, romantic and idealistic. He had

¹⁰ Journal, February 14, 1735.

read the materials of the SPG, the testimonies of the colonists, and the Danish mission work in India—all of which had a strong dose of reality—yet he believed his experience would be different. He was somehow going to get out of the designated religious responsibilities in the colony and evangelize the Native Americans. He was somehow going to overcome the racist and ethnocentric attitudes of the colonists to build rapport with the Native Americans and the African slaves. He also believed that he would overcome the temptation of the Roman Catholics to use coercion to impose his faith on non-Christians. He believed that by mere education and persuasion that people would accept Christianity in spite of the negative treatment by the European colonists. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe Enlightenment's influence on John Wesley, however one can speculate that German idealism and the overall optimism of the Enlightenment period heavily influenced Wesley. Also John Locke's assumption that the human soul is a *tabula rasa* and that each human being, all things being equal, will make rational choices. Lastly, we can speculate that John Wesley's innocence was just youthful naivety, that all of us have suffered from—some more recently than others. So how did his real life experience as a missionary influence his view of missions? We can observe for sure is that John Wesley's idealistic missiology set him up for a big fall.

John's overall experience in Georgia was a disaster at a personal, professional and spiritual level. The confluence of John Wesley's lack of preparation for a romantic relationship, his naïve understanding of foreign missions, and his encounter with Moravian faith of assurance, caused a cataclysmic confrontation between idealism and reality. Personally he failed in his courtship of Sophey Hopkey, professionally he resigned of his post as Minister of Savannah and fled Savannah prematurely. Spiritually,

Wesley failed in his original quest of evangelizing the Native Americans and lost his faith. He recorded in his diary:

“It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I the least of all suspected), that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God. ‘I am not mad’, though I thus speak, but ‘I speak the words of truth and soberness’; if haply some of those who still dream may awake, and see that as I am, so are they.”¹¹

For a while longer, Wesley transferred his idealism to the Moravians believing that they are the closest example to primitive Christianity. After returning to England he what would be a most influential dialogue partner in the young Moravian pastor, Peter Bohler. The two seemed to hit it off right away and to whom Wesley would confess his most intimate existential questions. Just ten days after their introduction, Wesley accompanied Bohler on a trip to Oxford and began to discuss his confusion to which Bohler replied: "My brother, my brother, that philosophy of yours must be purged away."¹² Sinking further into a crisis that psychologists today might call “post-traumatic stress syndrome,” or missiologists today might call “reverse culture shock,” or laymen might simply call “depression,” Wesley revealed his situation to his new friend:

"Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?" I asked Böhler, whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, "By no means." I asked, "But what can I preach?" He said, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."¹³

¹¹ Journal, January 29, 1738.

¹² *Journal*, February 18th, 1738.

¹³ *Ibid*, March 4, 1738.

The two continued to meet off and on during the spring of 1738 and Wesley would continue to ask if he should keep preaching. They also discussed doctrine and Bohler taught Wesley about the nature of faith, faith of assurance and justification by faith alone. More than his words, Wesley was convinced by the happiness and holiness of the Moravians as fruits of the living faith. Wesley's faith journey and his conversations with Bohler led him to the "heart warming" experience at Aldersgate on May 24th and the desire to visit Herrnhut. Wesley's visit to Herrnhut in August of the same year allowed him to see the Moravians first hand in their setting. On one hand he was very impressed with their organization and spiritual disciplines and call them the closest manifestation to primitive Christianity that he was witnessed. On the other hand, Wesley's trip to Herrnhut was a confrontation between his idealized image of the Moravians and the reality of Zinzendorf's authoritarian leadership style. Once back in London, Wesley and Peter Bohler began the United Society together at Fetter Lane on May 1, 1738 with many Moravian practices established in its "rules." This society functioned well for a while, but after Bohler's departure for the New World and during Wesley's frequent preaching trips, a new Moravian leader arrived from Herrnhut with the doctrine of stillness. Wesley objected to this antinomianism over the course of nine months until he stood up on July 20th, 1740 and pronounced:

I believe these assertions to be flatly contrary to the Word of God. I have warned you hereof again and again, and besought you to turn back to the law and the testimony. I have borne with you long, hoping you would return. But as I find you more and more confirmed in the error of your ways, nothing now remains but that I should give you up to God. You that are of the same judgment, follow me. I then, without saying anything more, withdrew, as did eighteen or nineteen of the society.¹⁴

¹⁴ Journal, July 20, 1740.

Wesley's disagreement with antinomianism and Moravian understanding of faith, along with his questions about Zinzendorf's hierarchical leadership style led to their break. Therefore Wesley started his own society at the Foundry and appropriated only the aspects of Moravianism that he saw fit.

Conclusions

In spite of his separation from the Moravians, Wesley would carry with him many ecclesiological contributions that he would apply to the now-fully Methodist movement. Between 1735 when he departed for Georgia and 1740 when the Fetter Lane Society split, Wesley participated in and appropriated Moravian practices such as bands, hymns, heart-felt religion, faith of assurance, the lovefeast, the Watch-night service, extemporary prayer and preaching, lay preaching, the conference and education are some of these. The Aldersgate experience was largely a result of his conversations with the Moravians, especially Peter Bohler. However, the question that we are addressing in this paper, however, is how much of Moravian foreign missions did Wesley appropriate? While Wesley used bands, hymns and extemporaneous preaching as part of a national mission effort to "spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land," he did not, according to my research, appropriate a Moravian vision of overseas mission. He did not take a proactive attitude toward sending missionaries to foreign lands. On a personal level, while George Whitefield made seven trips to the American colonies and established the Savannah orphanage and several societies, Wesley never did return nor did he send others until he

received a request for missionaries in North America and sent Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman in 1769. After receiving another request Wesley considered returning to the colonies, but ill health and responsibilities at home kept him from traveling far. Aside from preaching missions to Ireland and Wales, Wesley never left England again. Also, the Moravians were a unique combination of persecuted refugees from Bohemia and Moravia and had a special calling to seek out safe haven, while also sensing solidarity with other marginalized peoples.¹⁵ Meanwhile Wesley returned to England after a painful experience in Georgia and found a “niche” in the midst of an ongoing revival in his home country. It is with good reason that Thomas Coke is deemed “the father of Methodist foreign missions.”

¹⁵ Zinzendorf was receiving pressure from the President of Upper Lusatia for having received too many of their best artisans and Herrnhut was getting too big and too visible. He had to keep a smaller profile by starting to disband Herrnhut, thus pushing them into the mission field. See An Extract of the Letter wrote by the Church of Herrnhut to the President of Upper Lusatia, 24 Jan. 1732.