

WESLEY AND THE POOR

A Latin American approach to the focus on the poor in Wesley's sermons¹

Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro*

Introduction

In order for us to reflect on Wesleyan theology in the Latin-American context, it is indispensable that we analyze the emphasis of the poor in Wesley's theology. This is the main point to be covered in this reflection.

The emphasis that John Wesley (1703-1791) gave to the poor is a transparent aspect in his writings and biographical traits. At the same time, Latin-American theology was forged in the reflection around the experience of the poor. The ecclesiastical institutions and the spheres of education and of theological reflection should give priority to the poor. However, this is one of the points that has been practically forgotten by Methodist churches in Brazil at the present time. With regards to this, a deepening of this theme is imperative.

There are many studies on the subject ("Wesley and the poor"), especially of a sociological and historical nature, as shall be discussed herein.² The trend is to affirm that the

¹ Reflections presented at the III Latin-American and Caribbean Encounter of Wesleyan Theology (Sao Bernardo do Campo-SP, Oct. 2003) entitled "Wesley and the poor: a Latin-American theological evaluation of the emphasis to the poor in John Wesley's sermons".

* Doctor in Theology, docent on Systematic Theology at the Methodist University (*Umesp*) and pastor to the Methodist community church in Jardim Santo André (Sao Paulo-Brazil).

² Several events and works about Wesleyan theology published in the international context present the theme of the poor. The main ones are:

1. 1977, Sixth Oxford Institute. The results can be found in: *Sanctification & Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition.*, by Theodore Runyon. Nashville-Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1981.
2. [I] Encounter of Methodist Theology, 1983, San Jose-Costa Rica. The results can be found in: *La Tradición Protestante en la Teología Latinoamericana: la tradición metodista* [The Protestant Tradition in Latin American Theology: the Methodist Tradition], by José Duque. San Jose-Costa Rica, DEI, 1983.
3. [II] Latin-American Encounter of Methodist Theologians, Piracicaba-Brazil. The results can be found in: VV. AA. *Luta pela Vida e Evangelização: a Tradição Metodista na Teologia Latino-Americana* [Struggle for Life and Evangelization: the Methodist Tradition in the Latin-American Theology] Sao Paulo-SP, Paulinas/Unimep, 1985.
4. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, by Theodore W. Jennings. Nashville-Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1990.
5. 1992 – Ninth Oxford Institute. The results can be found in: *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan tradition*, by Douglas Meeks. Nashville-Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1995.
6. 1999 – Southern Methodist University Conference. The results can be found in: *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*, by Richard P. Heitzenrater. Nashville-Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 2002.

composition of the Methodist groups in England at the time of Wesley was mainly of poor people. As such, primitive Methodism was formed by the poor and had in its leadership (especially John Wesley) a sensitivity and special care for this group, including attention dedicated to children.

Theologically, beyond historical and sociological studies, what is of interest to us is the material produced by Wesley (personal sermons, notes, letters, notations). With this, it is possible to more adequately construct a theology that could, in tune with other studies about the Theologian and Methodism, dialogue with the Brazilian and Latin-American reality in general. For example, Latin-American theology possesses in the poor its central element and here there are diverse and creative connections.

What would be Wesley's contribution to a Latin-American Methodist theology? Some efforts have already been made in the direction of answering this question. One of the objectives of this brief analysis is to present, in general terms, some of the already established debate since the 1970s. In this direction, some of the most relevant contributions to understanding Wesley in the Latin-American context are listed, particularly the emphasis given to the poor. Some comments on the reference to the poor found in John Wesley's sermons will follow. Through them, we expect to be able to create a more appropriate basis for a Wesleyan theological interpretation in a Latin American perspective.

1. The reference to the poor in Wesley's work

In *The Works of John Wesley*, we find the word "poor" registered 1,448 times - half of them registered in Wesley's diary and the other part (440 times) in the doctrinal letters and writings; in the sermons, the word "poor" is found 266 times. Among these 1,448 registers, 206 times we find the generic expression "rich and poor". For example: "I preached in Cardiff, and the entire congregation, rich and poor, found themselves in the presence of God" (*Journal*, Thursday, 1743/9/29). The other two hundred times, the word has a symbolic sense. Example: "poor sinner", "poor soul", etc. When these two senses are eliminated, we reach the mark of about a thousand uses of the word (in the socioeconomic sense) by Wesley in sermons, letters, biblical and personal notes.

What does this number represent? What does it mean? Is it an expressive amount or not? Obviously, the mathematics of the words is not enough to understand theology. However, the numbers have meaning. When comparing the word "poor" with others of the religious world found in Wesley's works, we perceive that it is above the others in the number of occurrences: salvation [945], cult [about 940], Gospel [879], mercy [783], piety [186], praise [563], redemption [267].

With more than a thousand references, it is possible to find only: God [12,693], Christ [3,246], Spirit - Holy Spirit and human spirit- [2,963], faith [2,579], sin [2,222], grace [1,612], heaven [1,379], prayer [1,174].

Therefore, with this comparison, the prominence of the reference to the poor in Wesley's work is undeniable.

This emphasis means, among other aspects, that the spiritualizing pastoral proposals, that rarely allow emphasis on the poor, need to ask themselves if, in fact, they are within the Wesleyan tradition. A healthy exercise would be to compare the social emphasis of Wesley with the references that he made in his work to the experience of the warm heart ["I felt my heart strangely warmed"; "But our hearts were warmed"; "God warmed many hearts"]. The reduced number of *eleven* times can confirm the thesis that such emphasis would be more North American than Wesleyan.

The strong presence of the word "poor" in Wesley's writings reveals that the context, in which Wesleyan theology was forged, was marked by a concrete relation with poor groups and families.

2. Comments on the reference to the poor in Wesley's sermons

When we read Wesley's sermons we find, in 56 of them, 137 references to the poor, where the necessary valuation and attention to this group is clear as a basic element of faith, or as an expression of "true religion".

2.1. "Do not accumulate treasure on Earth"

Some of the prominent texts are based on the Sermon on the Mount; especially on "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Discourse VIII", in which Wesley emphasizes Christian

ethics that must be marked by solidarity and sharing. He warns the rich to “stop believing that they are better than the poor people”.

When citing William Law, Wesley makes another strong criticism of the rich who "do not give money to the poor in order to buy poison [vain things] for themselves" or still the ones who "keep money in safes at the same time that some poor brothers have necessities (...) are wild and cruel".

Wesley emphasizes that "the great majority of them [of the rich] are under the curse, the special curse of God, so that according to the general context of their lives, they are not only stealing from God (...), but also from the poor". Wesley, based on the biblical reference of Matthew 25:40 ("as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me"), emphasizes the importance of "giving to the poor with pure intention and straightness of heart". He is inspired by Proverbs 19:17 ("who gives to the poor, loans to Iahweh") which relativizes the ownership of worldly goods and gives prominence to solidarity and eschatological rewards.

The Christian ethic drawn by Wesley, therefore, possesses such a profile: the emphasis on sharing with the poor the goods that, in fact, belong to God. Thus, the people, in especial the rich, must "be ready to share with each one in accordance to his necessities. Distribute, give to the poor, give bread to the hungry, dress the naked, house the foreigner, give or send aid to the one that is in jail (...) be good and loyal butlers of God and of the poor".

2.2. "You will always have the poor with you"

The expression "you will always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11) is often used in churches to ideologically justify the existence of poverty and see it as something foreseen in the Bible and that, therefore, cannot be modified. Personally, I observe that the great majority of people who thus express themselves do not live together nor have familiarity with the poor. In other words, "you will *never* have the poor with you".

The controverted expression "you will always have the poor with you" was cited by Wesley in three of his sermons, and corrects the cited ideological use of the expression in question:

- "On Dress" (Sermon 88, 1786). The expression means that we always have to have devotion and care with the poor. "One shall not spend resources with futile and superfluous things, if [these] it can help the poor with the economy of these expenses".
- "The Reward of the Righteous" (Sermon 99, 1777). The expression means that we have to always be together with the poor. "One cannot wait to practice mercy, because the poor are always there with you".
- "On Worldly Folly" (Sermon 119, 1790). The expression also means to be aware of the reality of the poor and to consider them in what one shall fundamentally do.

3. Wesley, the poor and Latin-American theology

As has been noted, both Wesleyan and Latin-American theology give special emphasis to the poor. However, in terms of research on the relation between these theologies it is necessary to understand, among the objects of analysis, the emphases that each gives to the poor. Are they the same?

Latin American theology, in general, understands that:³

- the poor are the ones that evangelize other people and groups. They are the carriers of the message of salvation.
- the Church must be *of* the poor and not *for* the poor.
- other ecclesial and social sectors (other social classes, ecclesiastical leaderships, professors of theology, intellectuals of other areas, etc...) need to learn the lesson of the Gospel with the poor, in spite of the contribution they can offer.
- Christ reveals himself in and through the poor.

Such understandings are present in 20th century Latin-American theology, but are also already found in the 16th century with Bartolomeu de Las Casas, for example.⁴ This means

³ The bibliography of reference is very ample. Among several titles, see the classics: *Do Lugar do Pobre* [From the Place of the Poor], by Leonardo Boff (Petropolis-RJ, Vozes, 1984) and *A Força histórica dos pobres* [The historical strength of the poor], by Gustavo Gutierrez (Petrópolis-RJ, Vozes, 1981).

to affirm that, despite the differences in context, theological-pastoral perspectives can be compared. Did Wesley, in his writings and practice, understand the value of the poor similarly as in Latin American theology? This is an aspect that needs to be given more attention. The works to be referred to herein offer references regarding same. However, a detailed study of the references to the poor in Wesley's writings still needs to be offered.

An initial approach was made in 1977, at the Sixth Oxford Institute, in England, which congregated scholars of Methodism from various countries. The time was marked by a strong ascension of Latin-American theology and many efforts and dialogues were undertaken. The results of this reflection can be found in the known work: *Sanctification & Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, edited in 1981 by Theodore Runyon, with the contribution of a variety of authors.

In general, the authors emphasize that there are similarities among the social concerns present in Wesleyan thought and in the liberation, black, feminist and Latin American theologies. In Wesley, the prominence is given to his criticism of economic oppression, to his fight against slavery and to the value given to women in Methodist societies. In the specific case of Latin-American Liberation Theology, the aspect that distances it from the Wesleyan vision is the *revolutionary* perspective that it possesses, especially due to the use of Marxist analyses, in contraposition to the *reformist* logic present in Wesley. However, despite the differences, Wesleyan theology and Liberation theology possess in common the task of not transforming doctrine and the practice of the church into something absolute or justifiable, but questioning them, as well as different aspects of Christian theology, based on a biblical vision of God's Kingdom.

After this experience, another two meetings had as their theme the attempt to deepen the theme "Wesley and the Latin-American context": [I] Methodist Theology Meeting, 1983, in San José, Costa Rica; and [II] Latin-American Meeting of Methodist Theologians, in 1984, in Piracicaba, Brazil. The result of the first meeting is the work *La Tradición Protestante en la Teología Latinoamericana: la tradición metodista* [The Protestant

⁴ Cf. GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. *Em Busca dos Pobres de Jesus Cristo: o pensamento de Bartolomeu de Las Casas* [In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ: the thought of Bartolomeu de Las Houses]. Sao Paulo-SP, Paulus, 1995.

Tradition in Latin American Theology: the Methodist Tradition], edited by José Duque (1983). One of the prominent texts is by Elza Tamez. "Wesley of the Poor", also presented in Oxford (1982). In this article, the author, as well as reflections about theological methodology and the relation between justice and salvation, presents the trajectory of several groups of Methodists who interpret the Bible and Wesleyan tradition from the perspective of the poor.

The results of the second meeting are in the work *Luta pela Vida e Evangelização: a tradição metodista na teologia latino-americana* [Struggle for Life and Evangelization: the Methodist Tradition in Latin-American Theology] (1985). They are very similar, given that several contributions are repeated in both volumes. Among them, we can emphasize the reflections by Mortimer Arias and Julio de Santa Ana (on the North American mediation of Methodism), Rui de Souza Josgrilberg (on a Latin-American Wesleyan theology), Ely Éser Barreto César (on the possibilities of a popular biblical reading in a Wesleyan perspective), Hugo Assmann and Franz Hinkelammert (on historical-sociological implications) and José Miguez Bonino.

This last author was prominent since the first debates cited above. Of his many contributions, one deserves special mention: "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective".⁵ In this article, Bonino presents the main aspects of Wesleyan anthropology and indicates how he demarcates the value of the human action in the sanctification/liberation process. With this, the implications in the Latin-American context are clear. The author analyzes Wesley's anthropological vision, whose negative emphasis is articulated with the optimism of grace. In this way, human action is not excluded when we talk about God's sovereign action; on the contrary, the concept of sanctification enhances the concreteness of action and takes up the biblical notion of alliance/partnership between God and the human being.

A second block of contribution by Miguez Bonino on the theme in question is found in the texts: "Was Methodism a Liberating Movement?" and "Methodism: Latin-American

⁵ In: RUNYON, Theodore (ed.). *Sanctification & Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville-Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1981.

Rereading".⁶ Here, the author offers a historical and sociological analysis of primitive Methodism and presents Wesley's social concerns. These, in the vision of the author, were not summarized in the form of social assistance but recognized the causes of social harm, since poverty was not seen as a "destiny" or fruit of personal inertia. Other subjects discussed are conversion, ecclesiology and the Wesleyan ecumenical perspective.

A third analysis is found in: "'The Poor Will Always Be With You': can Wesley Help us discover How Best to Serve 'Our Poor' Today?"⁷ In synthesis, Bonino values Wesley's practice in favor of the poor as an example of a theological perspective that is based on an organic unity between the personal meeting with Christ made possible by the Holy Spirit and commitment to a life of love and service. In this unity, Christian mercy and justice become active and preponderant factors for faith.

After these reflections, a special theological moment happened during the III Latin-American Meeting of Methodist Theologians, in 2003, in São Paulo, Brazil. The emphasis on the poor was present. However, the Latin American reality was seen not only from a socioeconomic perspective, but also in a larger view including cultural aspects like ethnic diversity, African and gender issues.⁸

At that time, I was able to share the first lines about 'Wesley and the poor' (pp. 177-186). Other papers offered similar reflections focusing on the relation among 'Theology, Politics and Culture': (1) "Ethics for the Common Good" ["Sujeito e ética do bem comum" (pp. 131-159)], by José Carlos de Souza, with an analysis of Wesley's Sermons based on new categories of the Latin American Thought by Franz Hinkelammert and Jung Mo Sung. (2) "John Wesley and the environmental crisis in Latin America" ["John Wesley y la crisis ambiental en America Latina" (pp. 161-176)], where Roy May shows the human being –

⁶ In: VV. AA. *Luta pela Vida e Evangelização: a Tradição Metodista na Teologia Latino-Americana*. Paulinas [Struggle for Life and Evangelization: the Methodist Tradition in the Latin-American Theology], 1985.

⁷ In: HEITZENRATER, Richard (ed.). *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*. Abingdon Press, 2002, pp. 181-193.

⁸ RIBEIRO, Claudio de Oliveira, RENDERS, Helmut, JOSGRILBERG, Rui, SOUZA, José Carlos de (orgs.). *Teologia e Prática na Tradição Wesleyana: uma leitura a partir da América Latina e Caribe*. [Theology and Practice in the Wesleyan Tradition: a reading from Latin America and Caribbean]. São Bernardo do Campo-SP, Editeo, 2005.

specially the poor, the most affected by economic problems – as the caretaker of the world. Roy May bases this reflection on the Wesleyan emphasis on the integral salvation. (3) “The world is my parish because another world is possible”, by José Duque. In this paper, a link between the slogan of the Social Global Forum (“Another World is Possible) and Wesleyan theology is established with a deep analysis of the Latin American social context.

As can be noted, even in the face of growing conservatism, we are trying to follow the Bible sentence: “Don’t forget the poor” (...).

Last but not least...

The trend is to notice in John Wesley, especially in his sermons, an understanding of work *for* the poor. It is a fact that there are moments in which he values the poor which can be understood – following the example of Latin American theology - as the power for evangelization that the poor possess. An example of this is the positive reference to the natives of Benin, in Africa in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*.⁹

However, the Wesleyan emphasis in general seems to be more associated with the idea of care, education, solidarity and assistance to the poor. This is very significant, considering that the poor have always been excluded during the entire history of the church.

A Brazilian Wesleyan theology needs to go beyond this. It needs to deepen the notion found in Wesley (of giving preference to the poor in the acts of care and concrete assistance), widening it in order to arrive at the biblical notion - strongly developed by Latin-American theology - that God’s kingdom is of the poor. (Luke 6:20).

⁹ *Works*, p. 64.

Bibliography

- DUQUE, José (ed.). *La Tradición Protestante em la Teologia latinoamericana*. San José–Costa Rica, DEI, 1983.
- GONZÁLEZ, Justo. *Wesley para a América Latina Hoje*. São Bernardo do Campo-SP, EDITEO, 2003.
- HEITZENRATER, Richard P (ed.). *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*. Nashville-EUA, Abingdon Press, 2002.
- JENNINGS, Theodore W. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*. Nashville-EUA, Abingdon Press, 1990.
- _____. *Wesley e o Mundo Atual*. São Bernardo do Campo-SP, EDITEO, 2007.
- MEEKS, M. Douglas (ed.). *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville-EUA, Abingdon Press, 1995.
- MIGUEZ-BONINO, José. *Metodismo: Releitura Latino-Americana*. Piracicaba-SP, UNIMEP/FTIM, 1983.
- _____. *Hacia una Eclesiologia Evangelizadora: uma perspectiva wesleyana*. São Bernardo do Campo-SP, EDITEO/CIEMAL, 2003.
- RIBEIRO, Claudio de Oliveira, RENDERS, Helmut, JOSGRILBERG, Rui, SOUZA, José Carlos de (orgs.). *Teologia e Prática na Tradição Wesleyana: uma leitura a partir da América Latina e Caribe*. São Bernardo do Campo-SP, EDITEO, 2005.
- RUNYON, Theodore (ed.). *Sanctification & Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville–Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1981.
- VV.AA. *Luta e Vida pela Evangelização: a tradição metodista na teologia latino-americana*. São Paulo-SP, Paulinas/Unimep, 1985.
- WESLEY, John. *The Works of John Wesley*. Nashville-EUA, Abingdon Press, 1985.

Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro is a Brazilian Methodist minister and theologian. Since 1984 he has worked with grassroots communities in poor areas firstly in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro (in a district called Baixada Fluminense) and also during the last seven years in São Paulo. He is a professor of Systematic Theology at the Methodist University of São Paulo (Brazil). He also works as an advisor to the Base Ecclesial Communities and to ecumenical groups. His dissertation at the Catholic Pontifical University (Rio de Janeiro – Brazil) was on Paul Tillich's Theology (2001), with the objective of creating a link with the Latin American Liberation Theology. He has published many articles in theological reviews and journals in Brazil and other countries. Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro participated in the Eleventh Oxford Institute (2002) sharing the paper "Toward a Brazilian Wesleyan Ecclesiology". He is married to Magali do Nascimento Cunha and is the father of 6-year-old Guilherme.