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Cultural Boundary Experience and the Methodist Connection

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Introduction

To ponder cultural boundary experiences in light of the ecclesial model of the Methodist connection¹ means taking the cultural context of ecclesiological and overall theological reflection seriously. Oftentimes it is out of cultural boundary experiences that theological reflection arises.² In my case the earliest experiences of faith were made in a bicultural setting. I grew up in a Methodist family in Austria, but was raised predominantly by my Swedish mother and grandmother. From my earliest childhood I lived a kind of cultural boundary existence, neither belonging wholly to the one nor to the other cultural setting. During my teens therefore, when belonging was of such great importance, I experienced comfort in belonging to God’s worldwide church that

¹ In this paper I use the American spelling of *connection*. The British spelling *connexion* only appears in explicit quotes.

² In the *Christian Formation* Working Group it was telling that four out of five British participants framed their contributions from the perspective of their cross-cultural experiences (cultural boundary experiences) as ministers in churches with an ethnic majority different from their own. Sheryl Anderson, a white English clergywoman, writes from the perspective of her church in South East London, a church of overwhelmingly West African origin. (“Formation for Mission – Do We Reap What We Sow?” - <http://www.oxford-institute.org/site/2007papers/2007-7Anderson.pdf>) Jennifer Smith, a white US-American clergywoman, gives an account of her research on holiness as a process of identity making in a predominantly Caribbean congregation. (“Vexing the Devil at Villa Road – Recovering the Language of Holiness in Christian Formation” / <http://www.oxford-institute.org/site/2007papers/2007-7SmithJ.pdf>) Martin Tullett, a white English male clergyperson, wrestles with his role as minister in a black majority church. (“*Serve the Present Age Our Calling to Fulfill* in a Black Majority Congregation?” - <http://www.oxford-institute.org/site/2007papers/2007-7Tullett.pdf>) Sherlyn Toppin, a black Caribbean clergywoman, examines how appropriate the shepherd model for Christian leadership is for a black woman serving a white church. (“Can the Shepherd Model Be an Effective Tool in Pastoral Practice and Christian Formation” – Paper presented at the 12th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies)

for me was represented in the intercultural and global Methodist connection, which I since have experienced from the perspective of seven different annual conferences on two continents.

In this paper I want to explicate my understanding that cultural boundary experiences are prime sites for the Christian formation of individuals and communities alike and that it is the connectional structure of global Methodism that more than ever has the potential of giving adequate ecclesial shape to these formative experiences.

The paper thus evolves around the three concepts *boundary*, *experience*, and *connection*. Two classical topics of Methodist discourse – experience and connection –, are here related with a topic less frequently discussed – the topic of the boundary. It is the experience of our boundaries that tangibly connects us with the reality we live in. And it is by experiencing our boundaries as connections that we come to our own both as communities and as individuals.³ There is a profound ambiguity to the experience of boundaries. On the one hand it is an experience of restriction. At our boundaries we are reminded of our human limitations. On the other hand boundaries are places of connection, since they are also zones where we become aware of our *utter dependence* on something that transcends us. It is this utter dependence that Schleiermacher almost two hundred years ago defined as piety (Frömmigkeit). Boundary experiences have the potential of evoking such feelings of utter dependence, such experiences of relatedness to God.⁴ I depart from Schleiermacher,

³ At the 11th Oxford Institute in 2002, drawing on process metaphysics, I tried to redeem the negative connotations of self-interest by arguing for a multiply and inherently connected self. – Nausner, Michael. Self and Economy. Self-Interest as Contributing to the Common Good? Paper presented at the 11th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford 2002. Online publication: <http://www.oxford-institute.org/site/2002papers/2002-5Nausner.pdf>

⁴ „Das Gemeinsame aller noch so verschiedenen Äußerungen der Frömmigkeit ... ist dieses, daß wir uns unserer selbst als schlechthin abhängig, oder, was dasselbe sagen will, als in Beziehung mit Gott bewußt sind.“ – Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher. Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche in seinem Zusammenhange dargestellt. Zweite Auflage 1830/31. In: Bolli,

however, when I relate existential and religious boundary experiences to each other.⁵ And for a similar reason I depart from much of Methodist discourse that circles exclusively around experience as an *inner feeling*, as explicitly “*Christian* experience, the experience of being redeemed, or knowing oneself to be forgiven.”⁶

It is my contention that Methodism’s emphasis on experience (as one of the four items in the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral – scripture, tradition, reason, experience) needs to be as much informed by boundary experiences in ordinary people’s lives as by the religious experiences in the “inner circle” of Methodists. By giving room for boundary experiences of individuals and communities in the life of the church, the Methodist notion of connection, connectedness takes on new meaning.

What then do I mean when I talk about the importance for the Methodist connection to pay attention to cultural boundary experiences? I want to approach this question by first addressing the meaning of boundary talk for theology and second by connecting boundary talk to the Methodist emphasis on experience. Finally I will formulate some conclusions regarding the Methodist commitment to a connectional ecclesiology.

Boundary

The importance of boundaries for theological insight has been highlighted by Paul Tillich almost eighty years ago, when he pointed out that “the boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge.”⁷ In addition to his emphasis on the

Heinz (Ed.). *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*. Nachwort von Karl Barth. Hamburg und München: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968. 26.

⁵ Schleiermacher distinguishes between relations to the *world* involving both feelings of freedom and dependence from relatedness to *God* that consists of utter dependence alone. – See: Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, pp. 29-31.

⁶ Marsh, Clive. *Appealing to Experience: What Does it Mean?* In: Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004. 119.

⁷ Tillich, Paul. *Religiöse Verwirklichung*. Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1930. 11.

epistemological significance of the boundary, in his autobiographical sketch *On the Boundary*⁸ he describes himself as continuously torn between diverging forces. “The experience of the infinite bordering on the finite,” he writes, “suited my inclination toward the boundary situation.”⁹ Tillich here tellingly correlates religious and existential boundary experiences, which implies that the realm of religious experience cannot be isolated from its existential and cultural context.

This understanding of the thickness and productiveness of the boundary is lost in much of Protestant theology that tries to strictly isolate the human from the divine in defense of transcendence. This is the case for example in Eberhard Jüngel’s understanding of the boundary. In his essay *In Praise of the Boundary* (*Lob der Grenze*) he affirms that “the human being is in a unique way a boundary being”¹⁰ and that boundaries are “shapes of developing relations.”¹¹ But these productive and relational aspects of human boundaries are lost in the continuous interpretation of these boundaries as imposed *limitations* (*Begrenzungen*) on human life (ontological boundaries, the divine Word, the “unspeakable,” death,...).¹²

Boundary experiences most frequently are described as experiences of limitation. When a person comes to his or her own limits in terms of physical or psychic capacity, when a person experiences loss or separation, when a person approaches death, we talk about boundary experiences. I believe that such boundary experiences are indeed privileged occasions for the experience of faith. David Tracy has expressed the simultaneity of the religious and the common aspect in a certain

⁸ Tillich, Paul. *On the Boundary. An Autobiographical Scetch*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966.

⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁰ „Der Mensch ist in einem unvergleichlichen Sinne ein Wesen der Grenze.“ - Jüngel, Eberhard. *Lob der Grenze*. In: Jüngel, Eberhard. *Entsprechungen: Gott – Wahrheit – Mensch*, Band 88, Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie. München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980. 372

¹¹ „...Formen sich vollziehender Verhältnisse“ - *Ibid*, 373.

¹² See: Jüngel, Eberhard. *Grenzen des Menschseins*. In: Jüngel, Eberhard. *Entsprechungen: Gott – Wahrheit – Mensch*, Band 88, Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie. München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980. 355-361.

experience in terms of ‘limit-to’ and limit-of’ the same experience.¹³ A “religious dimension to existence,” Tracy writes, “is disclosed ... in the limit-experiences recognized most clearly in the ‘boundary-situations’ (death, guilt, trust, love, order).”¹⁴ Being confronted at our boundaries with our own limitations, we are challenged to either trust something beyond our limitations or not. We have the choice to make the leap of faith or not, as Kierkegaard would say.

Various boundary experiences are significant as potential occasions for an encounter with God. Here I want to focus on the experience of *cultural encounter* as one of the key examples for boundary experiences in a globalized world and in pluralistic societies. Cultural (and ethnic) boundaries, however they are interpreted, are over and over again seen to be contested zones in an increasingly intercultural global situation. It is therefore a great chance for a global church family such as the Methodist movement and its connection to allow such cultural boundary experiences to become occasions of mutual enrichment and ultimately faith experiences.

Only recently has the significance of boundary analysis in cultural anthropology been acknowledged as a resource for theology.¹⁵ One of the most important insights for theologians concerned with Christian community and ecclesiology is the emphasis of postmodern cultural anthropologists on the fluidity of cultural boundaries. Any description of cultural communities as clearly bounded wholes is a construction that is not able to account for various forms of overlapping,

¹³ In my correlation of everyday boundary experiences and religious boundary experiences I am indebted to David Tracy’s development of the concept of limit. It is a concept that “can be used as a key ... category for describing certain signal characteristics peculiar to any ... experience with a properly religious dimension ... (A)ll significant implicitly religious characteristics of our common experience will bear at least the ‘family resemblance’ of articulating or implying a limit-experience ... We can often ... experience ... the ‘limit-to’ aspect of the religious experience. On such occasions, we may also find the ability ... to ‘show’ ... the ‘limit-of’ such ... experience.” – Tracy, David. *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*. Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975. 93.

¹⁴ Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroads, 1981. 160.

¹⁵ Tanner, Kathryn. *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

mixture, and hybridity.¹⁶ If one understands Christian community as in certain respects analogous with cultural entities, one needs to be wary of drawing clear boundaries between Christians and non-Christians. And not only that: It is probably not in the center of the Christian community but exactly at these boundaries as productive zones of encounter that the most important part of Christian formation is happening.¹⁷ Kathryn Tanner expresses this insight succinctly when she writes: “The distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it; Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary.”¹⁸ The cultural boundary itself becomes the site of Christian formation.¹⁹ In this sense the Christian community needs over and over again to become a space where *different* people can have a sense of belonging. It means to be *at home with others*. Otherwise it risks participating in those European exclusionary tendencies that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his essay *Cosmopolitanism* has formulated so strikingly: “(B)eing at home with oneself,” Derrida writes, “supposes a reception or inclusion of the other which one seeks to

¹⁶ The theological consequences of taking such cultural analyses – and especially postcolonial theory – seriously have recently been reflected on in books like: Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, Mayra Rivera. *Postcolonial Theologies. Divinity and Empire*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; Kwok Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005; Wonhee Anne Joh. *Heart of the Cross. A Postcolonial Christology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006; Joerg Rieger. *Christ and Empire. From Paul to Postcolonial Times*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007; Mayra Rivera. *A Touch of Transcendence. A Postcolonial Theology of God*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

¹⁷ US Latina/o theology is an example for a theology that takes the location at the boundary as a starting point. It understands itself as a connecting theology, a *teología de/en conjunto*. Contextuality is part and parcel of that theology. And it is the location at the boundary “at which one experiences that human beings always already are in relation and exchange with each other.” It is a “*theology at the boundary*, i.e. a theology of humans and for humans ... who want to live their life- and faith experience from the perspective of boundary walkers.” – Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (Ed.). *Glaube an der Grenze. Die US-amerikanische Latino-Theologie*. Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2002. 14,15. (my translation) Virgilio Elizondo transfers this focus on the boundary into Christology by describing Jesus as a “borderland reject” in solidarity with people hurt and crushed by cultural boundaries. – Virgilio Elizondo. *Galilean Journey. The Mexican-American Promise*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, 2000. 54ff.

¹⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 115.

¹⁹ What this analysis of the boundary as the site of cultural formation might entail for Christian theology, I have examined in my dissertation. – See: Nausner, Michael. *Subjects In-Between. A Theological Boundary Hermeneutics*. Madison, NJ: Drew University, 2005.

appropriate, control, and master according to different modalities of violence.”²⁰ It is in the oftentimes uneasy encounter with cultural difference at its own boundary that the Christian community comes to its own and fulfills its mission,²¹ and not by *integrating* more and more people into its own cultural standards of belonging.

In Germany, where I now have lived the past two years, the risk of attempting an appropriating integration of otherness into the Christian church is real. Ever since a conservative politician years ago challenged foreigners to adapt to German *Leitkultur* (English: *leading* or *core culture*), a fierce discussion has erupted as to the nature of this *Leitkultur*, whether it is something desirable or whether it exists at all. But the damage is done and I have a sense that this talk of *Leitkultur*, connected as it seems to be to an old elitist understanding of high culture, tempts many Germans to understand *integration* as a matter of pulling otherness within the bounds of one’s own culture for the purpose of assimilating it as much as possible to this imaginary *Leitkultur*. Churches as integrated parts of German culture are far from immune against such an understanding of cultural integration.²²

²⁰ The essay *Cosmopolitanism* originates in a speech that Derrida gave to the International Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg, a city whose border identity he highlighted in his speech – Jacques Derrida. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001. 17.

²¹ This, after all, is how the church began to grow and to develop its *connecting* potential. It developed within Judaism by negotiating the boundary markers in the encounter with non-Jews. Inspired by postcolonial theory, Daniel Boyarin gives an intriguing account of the forceful construction of the sharp boundaries between Judaism and Christianity by the heresiologists of the first centuries. – Boyarin, Daniel. *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

²² This can be seen, for example, in a recent publication of EKD Text 86 “Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft” (*Clarity and good neighborly relations*) on Christians and Muslims in Germany. There the Christian church is described as a the seedbed and guarantor of the lawful order of the modern constitutional state, which implies that Islam still has a long way to go to reach the level of Christianity and therefore needs to work hard if it wants to hope for *integration*. With such a sense of cultural ownership, it is clear that a real negotiation *at* the Christian-Muslim boundary is not intended here. – Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft, (http://www.ekd.de/download/ekd_texte_86.pdf) 23ff. – Related to this is the sense of (imperial) Christian entitlement when it comes to Europe as the *Christian Occident*, notwithstanding the fact that Christianity since a long time is much more alive in other parts of the world. This is often formulated by Roman Catholics, but seems to me to reflect a general Christian sentiment that the boundaries of Christian Europe need to be protected against all intruders. The personal secretary to the pope, Georg Gänswein, has most recently given expression to this sentiment very explicitly: It is a “fact that a continent such as Europe cannot live, if one cuts off its Christian

The German philosopher Ronnie Peplow has illustrated the exclusionary function of the *Leitkultur* discourse by pointing out that it conflates “occidental, Christian and German values.”²³ And it is such a conflation any Christian community, and not least the global Methodist connection, needs to be wary of. Peplow goes on to distinguish between different ways of describing the cultural/ethnic situation in Germany. *Leitkultur*, he asserts, is used parallel with the concept of *multiculturalism*, (assuming clear cut boundaries between cultural entities existing next to each other) which he rejects since “every human being also belongs to a minority.”²⁴ *Transculturality* accounts for the transfer processes between cultures, but still treats cultures as distinct wholes. Peplow opts for the concept of *interculturality* that mirrors the “in-between” that emerges in cultural contacts. There is an “overlapping that belongs to both cultures and still is unthinkable without the other. The opening to the other and the blending are key characteristics in this ... *in-between* that is no cultural no-man’s land ... but in which new cultural forms are emerging.”²⁵ The way in which Peplow describes the *in-between* of intercultural relations is how I understand the cultural boundary at which necessarily identity changing experiences are made.²⁶

In the context of Christian formation Emmanuel Y. Lartey has argued in a similar way for an “intercultural approach” in pastoral theology out of his own experience of being “shaped and influenced by multiple cultures and traditions.”²⁷ In such a situation a *multicultural* understanding of interethnic relations that presupposes

roots, because this takes away its soul.” – Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin, July 27, 2007, 14. (My translation)

²³ Ronnie M. Peplow. *Interkulturelle Dialogik*. In: Wolfdietrich Schmiech-Kowarzik. *Verstehen und Verständigung. Ethnologie, Xenologie, interkulturelle Philosophie*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002. 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63. (My translation)

²⁶ One of the most complex descriptions of these boundary dynamics of cultural encounter can be found in: Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.

²⁷ Emmanuel Y. Lartey. *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006. 10.

distinct cultures existing next to each other does not suffice. Instead “(w)e need to move from a multicultural to an intercultural community,” Lartey asserts, “from a static description of the existence of many to a dynamic recognition of interaction, mutual influence, and interconnectedness.”²⁸ In such an intercultural community of interconnections absolutely distinct cultural spheres cannot be identified any more. Rather the cultural boundary zones, the in-between spaces of encounter emerge as prime sites of the shaping of identity.

So far I have tried to emphasize the significance of boundaries not so much as stable markers of cultural identity in general and Christian identity in particular. My concern here is not with the excluding and dividing capacity of boundaries. Far too much energy has been spent throughout the history of Christianity on such clear cut divisions. My emphasis instead has been on boundaries as places of experience and more concretely on cultural boundaries as contact zones and locations of key experiences for Christian formation. For Christian discipleship not so much the distinguishing capacity (rational discernment) of boundaries is of ultimate concern here but rather the kind of experiences that are occurring (experiential discernment) at these boundaries. This is in tune with the traditional Methodist emphasis on experience as a key source for Christian formation and therefore also for theological reflection. The question of course needs to be asked, as Clive Marsh recently has done: What does it mean when Methodists appeal to experience?²⁹

Experience

²⁸ Ibid, Front cover.

²⁹ Marsh, Clive. *Appealing to Experience: What Does it Mean?* In: Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004. 118 – 130.

It may mean, generally speaking, that one follows the distinctly Wesleyan emphasis of experience on a very basic epistemological level. Theodore Runyon has pointed out the methodological innovation in “Wesley’s explicit introduction of an empirical component into theological argumentation,” whereby “the influence on Wesley of the philosopher John Locke is seen, for Locke had argued for taking empirical evidence and experience seriously as a source for arriving at judgments.”³⁰ It is, however, not Wesley’s reliance on the epistemology of Lockean philosophy – partly developed in these hallowed halls of Christ Church College, I assume – that first comes to mind when we speak of the Methodist emphasis on experience, but rather an emphasis on inner *religious* experience, Wesley’s own experience of the “warmed heart” and conversion experiences in general. But already Frank Baker has shown that the experience Wesley appealed to “was not an individual’s instinctive ‘feeling’ . . . , but an analysis of the objective realities of Christian life.”³¹

And it is significant to bear in mind that Wesley himself did not make much of the frequently quoted Aldersgate experience. The “hesitancy on the part of Wesley to follow the pietist practice of dwelling on religious experiences,” writes Runyon, “must give us pause.”³² Doubts and temptations followed this experience, which is why historians have pointed out “that Aldersgate should not be given the place of preeminence accorded to it in Methodist lore.”³³ And I myself wonder if one should not count among the “nontheological factors at Aldersgate”³⁴ Wesley’s multiple and at times traumatic cultural boundary experiences in Georgia. In his journal he records encounters with Europeans of different tongues and religions, but above all

³⁰ Runyon, Theodore. *The New Creation. John Wesley’s Theology Today*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. 23.

³¹ Quoted in: Randy L. Maddox. *Responsible Grace. John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994. 46.

³² Runyon, *New Creation*, 49.

³³ *Ibid*, 50.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

encounters with slaves and native Americans. These experiences were still very much alive when he had just arrived back from Georgia in early 1738 and must have had a tremendous impact on his emotional life at the time of his Aldersgate experience.

My concern, however, is not to settle the question what Wesley might have experienced in the 1730s, but rather to highlight the theological significance of cultural boundary experiences for the contemporary global Methodist connection. Regarding the Methodist emphasis on experience in general Clive Marsh has pointed out a certain ambivalence and therefore the need to clarify in what way this emphasis is related to everyday experience, since “there are two ways of talking about experience in Christian theology: one is ‘life experience’ which is then theologically interpreted; the other is a particular kind of life experience which may be called ‘religious experience.’”³⁵ To separate ‘life experience’ from ‘religious experience’ is a temptation that any contextually inclined theology needs to avoid. I therefore agree with Marsh that Methodist theology often has focused on experience as an inner experience in religious settings and therefore “shares the weaknesses of ... (modern) theologies in leaving unexplored what makes the *everyday* experiences theological, around which understandings of redemption by God are woven.”³⁶ The theological significance of everyday life experience needs more exploration. I consider cultural boundary experiences to be one important aspect of everyday life experience. In today’s increasingly globalized world there lies an increasing ‘ordinariness’ in the encounter with culturally different people. I perceive these encounters to be prime instances of the sort of boundary experience that lets us participate in God’s cosmic redemptive work that in a paradigmatic way is exemplified in the connectional structure of the Methodist movement.

³⁵ Marsh, *Appealing to Experience*, 119.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 122. (Emphasis added)

The experience in these contact zones to culturally different people can save us from mistaking the homogeneity of cultural belonging for Christian community itself. It can save us from our blindness to the culturally limited expressions of our Christian life. This Christian life, as Marsh reminds us, is nothing less than participation in Christ,³⁷ and the experience of such participation that at the same time is a cosmic participation *must* lead us beyond the bounds of our own cultural group. Our participation in Christ is more than a cozy belonging to a group of likeminded people, which is why we need be in touch with culturally different people to fulfill our Christian calling, also if this at times entails the participation in Christ's suffering as well.

Cultural boundary experiences, then, remind our congregations theologically speaking of the scope of our participation in Christ and therefore in the body of Christ, Christ's worldwide church. They are therefore crucial in order not to succumb to a narrow understanding of church as a comfortable home or a family, which seems to me to be a constant temptation in many dwindling Methodist churches today. The challenge to our congregations then is to create an atmosphere of trust at these boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the citizen and the foreigner, between the culturally adjusted and the culturally alien.

Now, I am not trying to neglect the fact that more often than not cultural boundary experiences give rise to fierce conflict whether they occur in church settings or elsewhere. Our newspapers are full of reports of such cultural conflicts. It is the more urgent for Christian churches not to accept these conflictual contact zones as battle lines lest they become promoters of cultural apartheid.

³⁷ Ibid, 125.

A story in the gospel of Luke according to my interpretation illustrates both the potential of violence in cultural boundary experiences but also the challenge to let them transform a community into a more connected fellowship. It is the story of Jesus' first return to Nazareth in Luke 4:14-30. Jesus is returning home, to his neighborhood, to the familiar. My interpretation of the extreme mood swing of the crowd from being enthusiastic (verse 22) to exploding with rage (verses 28-30) is that it has to do with the disappointed expectations of the people to meet someone familiar, someone who sticks to their customs and affirms them in their cultural identity. Jesus fulfills none of these expectations and instead before the eyes of family and former neighbors becomes a stranger and on top of it identifies with the foreign heathens (the widow in Sidon and the Syrian Naaman – verses 25-27). Notwithstanding the fact that he supposedly has returned *home* to the place where he had grown up (verse 16), Jesus here takes on the role of the culturally different and exposes his kin to a boundary experience that they are not prepared to endure. The emotional intensity of the reaction of the people of Nazareth is enormous. Because of the narrowness of their expectations, Jesus' own people here deprive themselves of the chance to hear and understand the grand vision of an enlargement of the "beloved community" that Jesus proclaims. The Spirit has led Jesus to position himself right there, between the Israelites and the foreigners and to negotiate this boundary. But the people he had grown up with were unable to enter into this negotiation. Instead they only see these words as a threat to their own wellbeing.

Before I venture into a description of my vision of the Methodist connection as an organism that can and must host cultural boundary experiences in a constructive way, I want to summarize how cultural boundary experience as crucial for a Christian

life and the Methodist connection can be understood by adapting some of Theodore Runyon's marks of *orthopathy*³⁸ or *right experience*.

I understand this experience as a sense of belonging to a wider community than I myself can overview and as participation in God's continuous new creation. Cultural boundary experience reminds us that any experience of God "must come from a source that is external to us."³⁹ It *transcends subjectivism*. To meet the culturally other is a chance to realize that "genuine experience of God is not *my* experience ... It is a *shared* reality ... This experience of the Other explodes the privatistic notion of experience that has characterized popular Western thought."⁴⁰ So does any encounter with the culturally different.

Not only are we connected through these encounters with a wider community, we are thereby also *transformed as subjects*. The experience of meeting the culturally other is not something the subject produces so to speak. The subject is rather modified by it. It "opens up new vistas, a whole new world of spiritual reality" and subsequently "places our actions in the context of God's renewal of the cosmos."⁴¹ If our spiritual renewal is part of the renewal of the whole creation, if "any genuine experience of God has cosmic dimensions,"⁴² something is necessarily missing if it builds on a *mono-cultural* experience. Cultural boundary experiences then in a connectional church should not be seen as *additional* possibilities but rather as belonging to the core of what the church as Christ's global community is all about.

This, finally, should not lead to an idealization of the cultural boundary experience in the sense that it *necessarily* equals an experience of the divine. Not everything in the encounter with the culturally other is spiritually enriching. There

³⁸ Runyon, *New Creation*, 160-167.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 161.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 163.

⁴² *Ibid*, 165.

needs to be a *rational* component to these experiences. The faith experience we make at the cultural boundary “is always open to comparison with, and correction by, other faith experiences ... and is not threatened by this rational process of ‘testing the spirits’ to see ‘whether they are of God’ (1 John 4:1).”⁴³ Together with the culturally different we are called to explore how in this encounter God’s connecting presence might be realized, since such cultural boundary experiences are privileged places for an encounter with God in a connectional church.

Connection

If *experience* is a term that needs continuous rethinking, to which I here have contributed in a very modest way, this is true for the term *connection* as well. It is a term that like no other term expresses the ecclesial identity of the Methodist movement. And it reflects what to my mind is true for individual and corporate identity alike: Identity cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but is always also a matter of whom one is connected with. In the beginning, however, it was not a term that was thought of ecclesiologically. For Wesley it was rather “a practical and pastoral arrangement in the service of mission,”⁴⁴ as Brian Beck points out. And, one might add, it also was a quite authoritarian arrangement, since the connection to start with essentially was about the connection with “Mr. Wesley” and his exercise of authority. The ecclesiological implications “became greater when the shift took place on his death from a connexion with John Wesley in person to a connexion with a conference.”⁴⁵ But not before the end of the twentieth century has an ecclesiological

⁴³ Ibid, 164.

⁴⁴ Beck, Brian. *Connection and Koinonia. Wesley’s Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal*. In: Randy L. Maddox. *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. 129.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 130.

understanding of connection surfaced in official Methodist documents such as the *Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church.⁴⁶

Beck points out that the connectional structure serves missionary needs, is interpersonal and universal, stresses mutual accountability, fulfills the function of oversight, and last but not least should mirror the covenantal obedience to God. Particularly the last point of the covenantal nature of the connection is lost once the voluntary aspect of it is stressed. I agree with Beck that connection at its best “is not a voluntary association but an ecclesiological discipline,”⁴⁷ in other words not a matter of choice but at the core of what Methodism is as a part of the body of Christ.

Now, the most important of Beck’s points for my purposes is his description of how the notion of *koinonia* challenges the notion of *connection*. He highlights “that *koinonia* embraces both unity *and diversity*,”⁴⁸ which for a long time has not been obvious to Methodists. It is the aspect of diversity that needs to be kept in mind for the notion of connection not to become a homogenizing force. The countless cultural boundaries that crisscross the global Methodist connection need to be understood on all levels as chances for ecclesial richness above all and not as limitations. In the task of recognizing and valuing these boundaries as chances for encounter international

⁴⁶ In the latest German version of the Book of Discipline, connection does not figure in the description of the theological task of the UMC, but is mentioned the first time in article 130 (equivalent with article 109 in the *Book of Discipline 2004*), which deals with the travel companionship of a mutually connected people. Theologically this is the densest text in the entire discipline regarding the connection, but its ecclesiological grounding is quite vague: „Verbundenheit (Konnexio) äußert sich in der evangelisch-methodistischen Tradition auf vielen Ebenen. Ihr Horizont ist weltumspannend, ihr Einsatz ortsbezogen. Sie gleicht einem lebendigen Gewebe von interaktiven Beziehungen. Wir sind miteinander verbunden durch eine gemeinsame Tradition des Glaubens, die unsere Grundlagen der Lehre und Allgemeinen Regeln einschließt; durch eine gemeinsame, in der Verfassung niedergelegte Arbeitsweise, welche ein allgemeines kirchenleitendes Amt einschließt; durch eine gemeinsame Sendung in der Zusammenarbeit in und durch Konferenzen, die den inklusiven und missionarischen Charakter unserer Gemeinschaft widerspiegeln; durch eine gemeinsame ethische Grundhaltung, die unser Handeln kennzeichnet.“ – Verfassung, Lehre und Kirchenordnung der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche. Frankfurt: Medienwerk der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche, 2005. 74. – In articles 139, 203, 246, and 430 the *Kirchenordnung (Discipline)* talks about the connection in purely organizational terms.

⁴⁷ Beck, *Connection and Koinonia*, 136.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 138. (Emphasis added)

congregations in urban settings (and increasingly in rural settings as well) might play a pivotal role. There the meaning of dwelling at and continuously negotiating cultural boundaries as a spiritual task becomes specifically apparent. In today's globalized world of course we *all* are in intercultural contexts, not only those designated *international congregations*. It remains valid, however, what a recent statement of a seminar for leaders in international Methodist congregations in Berlin claims about these congregations: "These ministries provide a foundationally unique understanding of ecclesiology and accompanying ministry. Globalism and localism intertwine daily in these church settings; resident aliens become global citizens in Christ."⁴⁹ This issue of "global citizenship in Christ" (see Ephesians 2:19) needs to be considered in any Methodist local church that takes its connectional heritage and identity seriously. Taking the global connection seriously would mean, for example, to refrain from applying the key ecclesiological metaphors from the Bible such as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) and the wine and its branches (John 15) exclusively to a limited group of people. It means continuously taking the presence of *the other*, the *culturally different* as a potential or real member of the body of Christ into account.

If cultural diversity is acknowledged the global Methodist connection indeed has a vital role to play in an increasingly globalized world. The concept of connection, as Philip Drake has pointed out, "resonates in a world where much is made of the process of networking within organizations, internet links on the worldwide web and the relational dimensions of human living."⁵⁰ But in its affirmation of cultural diversity it also needs to be a counter force to the homogenizing power of

⁴⁹ Statement from the *Church Growth Seminar for International United Methodist Congregations in Europe* organized by the United Methodist Church in Germany in Berlin January 9-12, 2006. (Unpublished Document)

⁵⁰ Drake, Philip. *Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness*. In: Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004. 136.

globalization. At the 10th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in 1997 Rowan Williams has put this challenge for the church to offer an alternative globalization succinctly when he said: “The responsibility of the churches ... as one of the few international organizations not primarily driven by money, is to keep alive the awareness of other forms of community in shared responsibility.”⁵¹ I want to understand the Methodist connection very much as a form of community that offers an alternative to the uniforming tendency of economic globalization. And it has the potential to illustrate what a global “shared responsibility” can imply. When Drake describes the Methodist connection as “being ecumenical in the widest sense, pushing the boundaries at every point, as we seek the larger Christ who calls us to live in new patterns of relationship and new networks,”⁵² I agree. But this pushing of boundaries should not be understood in an imperial sense.⁵³ A connectional way of pushing the boundary does not mean expansion at any price, but rather to situate oneself at the boundary and in a certain way to understand oneself as a disciple of Christ as a boundary dweller, because “Methodist membership is not a closed circle marking a boundary to keep others out. It is intended to be an open connexion, looking to reach out into the world.”⁵⁴ Maybe Methodist membership then could be understood as an exercise of boundary dwelling insofar as the Methodist connection never allows local churches to become exercises of encirclement. In the connection it is precisely the boundaries themselves as contact zones to other members of the connection and the

⁵¹ Beck, Brian. *Exploring Methodism’s Heritage. The Story of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies*. Nashville, TN: The Board of Higher Education and Ministries of the United Methodist Church, 2004. 72.

⁵² Drake, *Joining the Dots*, 138.

⁵³ For a careful study on the correlation between early Methodism and the rise of empire, see: Hempton, David. *Methodism. Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

⁵⁴ Drake, *Joining the Dots*, 139.

surrounding culture that become privileged sites not only of ecclesial identity, but of the encounter with God as well.⁵⁵

For understanding the Methodist connection as a *boundary exercise* it can be illuminating to see it in the context of one of its most important historical correlates, itinerancy. Pondering itinerancy will also provide us with some caution to idealize the connectional system. It is certainly not claiming too much to maintain that the Methodist connection to a large extent has its roots in itinerancy. At the rise of Methodism itinerancy was probably the most efficient practice to hold the connection together. And from the very beginning it was a transatlantic enterprise. The historian Timothy D. Hall in his study *Contested Boundaries*⁵⁶ has shown how itinerancy has connected a transatlantic community of believers and how this practice can be interpreted as a contestation of multiple boundaries in a new historical situation. This historical study is helpful and at times sobering reading for theologians like me who are tempted to read idealized conditions into historical contexts. It helped me to keep in mind that itinerancy besides all its virtues and ecclesial implications also was intimately linked to the British colonial project and in tune with the spread of market economy.⁵⁷ In other words, it did on the one hand connect believers in a wider connection than ever imagined before,⁵⁸ but it also participated in the exclusions

⁵⁵ This is what is suggested in cultural anthropologist Lucia Ann McSpadden's book *Meeting God at the Boundaries*, in which she presents her results of interviews with cross-culturally and cross-racially appointed United Methodist ministers in several annual conferences in the United States. See: Lucia Ann McSpadden. *Meeting God at the Boundaries. Cross-Cultural-Cross-Racial Clergy Appointments*. Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2003. – Focusing more generally on leadership for people of faith, Gary Gunderson has argued that leadership needs to take place in the boundary as a contact zone: "Boundary leaders think of their community as a kind of estuary in which salt water and fresh water mingle." – Gary Gunderson. *Boundary Leaders. Leadership Skills for People of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. 23.

⁵⁶ Timothy D. Hall. *Contested Boundaries. Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 2,9.

⁵⁸ "The boundaries of traditional society were weakening, opening avenues whereby the peoples of the English Atlantic could gain a new sense of connection with distant, anonymous, but similar people – an 'imagined community,' in the historian Benedict Anderson's phrase, which transcended the sphere of immediate experience to embrace a world far beyond local horizons." – *Ibid*, 4.

effected by the social and political dynamics of its time. A quote by Francis Asbury, one of the most active itinerant preachers in the early American connection, may illustrate this complicity: “Everything is kept moving as far as possible,” Asbury writes, “and ... there is nothing *like this* ... for the continual extension of that circumference on every hand.”⁵⁹ It is the heritage of exclusionary and colonial dynamics (connecting “distant ... but *similar* people” – “extending that circumference”) and their consistent temptation that the contemporary Methodist connection needs to remain aware of.⁶⁰

Hall treats itinerancy not simply as a historical practice, but also as a “category of meaning,”⁶¹ a category that was seen by many as a threat to the social order because of its continuous neglect of existing boundaries. “Itinerancy,” Hall writes, “came to situate human action and identity in a world of broader spatial, social, and conceptual horizons.”⁶² And as such it is an important precursor for the development of a global Methodist connection to this day, even though itinerancy in terms of mobility today more and more seems to shift from the side of ordained ministry to lay people, i.e. the exchange of lay members in certain churches is quicker than the exchange of appointed ministers.

Hall’s concluding comments on the significance of itinerancy for the negotiating of boundaries is of relevance for today’s global Methodist connection. After pointing out the interrelationship between boundaries of space, society and self, all of which were challenged by itinerancy,⁶³ he goes on to say that “(o)n the frontier,

⁵⁹ Quoted in *ibid*, 131.

⁶⁰ The *Connectional Table*, a 60-member group responsible for coordinating the mission, ministries and resources of the United Methodist Church, has recently suggested to change the name of “central conference” to “regional conference” to avoid the disturbing connotations with the “central jurisdiction” that in the first half of the 20th century organized United Methodists of African descent in an organizational body of its own.

⁶¹ Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 7.

⁶² *Ibid*, 15.

⁶³ These included geographical, gender, and race boundaries.

where few meaningful external boundaries existed, itinerants compensated by propagating revivalism's stringent morality."⁶⁴ In times of globalization we are again in the situation of rapidly dissolving boundaries of different kinds, and the moral challenges arising from the vanishing of "meaningful external boundaries" are great indeed. Instead of "propagating revivalism's stringent morality" as boundary marker, or building fortresses of another kind, however, I suggest that today the moral imperative in the context of the global Methodist connection lies in the continuous and patient negotiation at and of the boundaries of our churches. A loving negotiation at these cultural and ecclesial boundaries (More often than not they overlap or are co-existent.⁶⁵) will keep the connection open for developing new forms of community in continuity with early itinerancy that "mitigated individualism by opening the way for commitment to new forms of community."⁶⁶

The Methodist connection then, if it wants to be true to its global and therefore diverse scope on the one hand and its resistance to excluding tendencies by the social status quo on the other hand, needs out of necessity to develop new forms of community. The continuous search for new forms of community is ultimately rooted in a creation centered soteriology that I consider an important aspect of our Methodist heritage. Our connection and any form of Christian community that arises from it cannot be strictly bounded of the simple reason that it partakes of God's continuous renewal of creation that takes place amidst our everyday struggles. Put in soteriological terms, our connectional ecclesiology needs to account for the fact, as Justo L. González has put it succinctly, "that salvation is not salvation *from* creation,

⁶⁴ Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 128.

⁶⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 104-119.

⁶⁶ Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 138.

but rather *into* the culmination or perfection of creation.”⁶⁷ The connection needs to facilitate a Wesleyan understanding of salvation (mirrored in his emphasis on sanctification) that can never be limited to individuals or an isolated circle of the elect, since “(f)or Wesley individual sanctification is part of a process whereby God is bringing humankind – and indeed all of creation – to its intended purpose and order.”⁶⁸

I suggest that this global and even cosmic aspect of salvation is guarded and put into practice by understanding the boundaries of the connection as contact zones that connect us in ever new ways with God’s renewal of creation. A full formulation of such an understanding of ecclesial boundaries is still missing. But the Yale theologians Miroslav Volf and Serene Jones, for example, have made useful suggestions in this direction. Volf, a native of Croatia, deeply disturbed by the exclusionary boundaries that the conflicting ethnicities tried to erect during the Yugoslavian war of the 1990s, resists the notion of isolated ethnicities and builds on the conviction that “the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another,” which leads him to the conclusion that exclusion is a “sinful activity of reconfiguring the creation.” He therefore suggests an understanding of boundaries as *non-exclusive*, which means that “boundaries are part of the creative process of differentiation” and that therefore “we must refuse to consider boundaries as exclusionary.”⁶⁹ My vision of the global Methodist connection would be in tune with such a reading of boundaries as non-exclusionary.

⁶⁷ Justo L. González. *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005. 49.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 185. – This, of course, is one of the key emphases already in Theodore Runyon’s book *The New Creation*, where he describes Wesley as operating “out of a comprehensive, soteriologically centered approach to theologizing, the bookends for which were *creation* and *new creation*.” – Runyon, *New Creation*, 222.

⁶⁹ Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996. 66-67.

Serene Jones, inspired by her many conversations with the women's group in her local church, is more explicitly ecclesiological when she describes the shape of the church in the paradoxical terms of *bounded openness*⁷⁰ as a model for a feminist, eschatological ecclesiology. The term bounded openness reflects the fact that the church as community cannot "be defined by kinship ties, geographic region, and ethnicity," but is constituted by "God's *openness* toward it."⁷¹ And she concludes with a description of the boundaries of the church that should resonate in Methodist ears: "The sanctified church knows that its boundaries exist in order that it might be a community formed for openness ... its boundaries exist to facilitate openness."⁷² Due to the giftedness of the church by the God of the entire creation, therefore, I understand the boundaries of the Methodist connection to be contact zones at which God's redemptive work in the world can become concrete.

⁷⁰ Serene Jones. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology. Cartographies of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. 169ff.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 172.

⁷² *Ibid*, 174-5.