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The Alliances of Methodism to defeat the Old Colonial Order related to Church and State in Argentina -1880-1890-

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"Although our church argues, like any other, that this universe, should be the happy and blessed domain of our Lord Jesus Christ, and seeks this goal faithfully, it does not find incompatible, that its members might be associated with men of the world for the achievement of high aims and ideals." Rev. Alberto Tallon, Buenos Aires, 1913.

How the church is involved with the non-Christian world?. What the church is involved for?. Is there a mission that goes far beyond to make disciples? These questions, simple or not, implies per se a theological affirmation that challenges the traditional answers, especially those which focus the mission only to make the church bigger, but not to make its mission faithful. The words quoted in the epigraph, comes to resolve clearly and in a simple way that old and pretended unsolved dichotomy, which sadly it is even so for many Christians today. Those words comes from a pretty quarrelsome time in which Methodism recognizes himself as an active part of a Nation still under construction. Argentine Methodism did not find incompatible, in that situation to be associated to "men of the world" to reform the Nation, and to men of faith to spread scriptural holiness across the land, borrowing Wesley's programmatic sentence. All depended on the goal they would pursued.

In this study we will focus on public theology of Methodism at the end of the XIX Century and the alliances they built with others groups "to achieve high aims and ideals". In the search of this end, the alliances of Methodism with non-Christian groups were defined not by the purity of a doctrine, nor for a self-centred interest, but for their common interest of reforming the Nation. At the last pages of this paper, I shall state some concluding thoughts on the present Methodist mission, and the terms through which it seeks to build its identity.

Historical Context

The situation in Argentina at the first half of the XIX Century, in terms of the links between State and the Catholic Church was critical. These historical bonds were a kind of renewed *Patronage (Patronato Regio)*, an institution inherited from Middle Ages which dispensed mutual benefits and power to Church and State alike.¹ The Spanish Empire during the Conquest of America, pushed the Church to forego some attributions of his absolute power by sharing them with the kings, for instance: the power of creating and sustaining new dioceses and electing the bishops, erecting buildings, etc. In such a way the Church could reach the whole geographic extension of the new continent thanks to the support and initiative of temporal power, in retribution the monarchs received a ten per cent of the incomes of the church. The temporal power, not only received permission of the church to represent it, but in most cases it replaced it. So Church and State were two faces of a same powerful coin! Sometimes one has the supremacy, sometimes the other. But temporal and spiritual power was linked and dependent each to another. In Argentina's Independence Revolution times (1810-1850), the Church recovers the supremacy over the State due to the declining of Spanish Royal power because of Napoleonic presence in Europe in one hand and a still fuzzy profile of the new Republic which was a new born and still unconsolidated State, in the other. The Argentina Catholic Church's influence reached again every corner of public and private life. It was a totalizing presence in a frame of intolerance toward the differences in terms of doctrine, habits, traditions and moral surveillance. However, during the second half of the 19th century, particularly in 1848, during the period of the liberal revolutions in Europe, the occidental world, in general, and the Rio de la Plata region, in particular,

¹ The encyclical *Unam Sanctam* by Bonifacio VIII in 1302 can be considered the last expression of theocracy, an extreme way to proclaim the concept of "*plenitudo potestatis*" (absoluteness of power of the church). The bull proclaimed "*out of the church there is no salvation nor remission of sins*". It also stated in a clear reference to temporal power that « *Therefore, here is the unity and uniqueness of the church, there is **only one head** and one body, not two heads like a monster* ». In this times the temporal power should be submitted to the spiritual one. The church was a totalizing reality which reached to every spheres of life. The bull concludes by stating: "*Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim and define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff*".

would be the setting for the awakening of the romantic ideals of the progressive liberalism which just in that moment were a valid political alternative with many chances to access government. As a defensive act, the Catholic Church recovered its conservative and counter-reforming practice. Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) gave new strength to the ideological battle against modernism by attacking frontally reinforcing the Papal authority through the Dogma of the *Immaculate Conception* (1854), and *Papal Infallibility* (1870). In the meantime, the Encyclical *Quanta Cura y el Syllabus* in 1864 were the maximum exponents of this policy of defense of the old order against “the errors of modernism.”²

In Argentina, the reaction of the liberal Governments was a profound secularization plan along over a decade. In the sphere of public education, in 1882, the National Pedagogical Congress decided to remove religious instruction from the public schools. In 1884, the Argentine government expelled the Papal’s delegate from the country. Another irritating factor for the Catholic Church was the Government’s initiative to invite U.S. Methodist teachers to work in Women Schools in Buenos Aires and Rosario City. In 1888, during the government of Juarez Celman, the Law of Civil Matrimony was enacted, which in one of its items stipulated a prison penalty for clergymen who celebrate weddings without previous signature of a civil judge. The Law of Civil Matrimony affected enormously the ethos, sensibility, the economic benefits, and prerogatives of the Catholic Church. ³ During all this time, Methodism was an active force, among others, in the propagation of the progressive atmosphere for the breaking with old colonial order.

² Jean Pierre Bastian, *Historia del Protestantismo en América Latina*, (México: Ed. CUPSA, 1986) , 140

³ See Carlos Alberto Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America*. Transl, by Richard Young, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 125ff.

The terms of the alliance

The liberal block⁴, was built up by several sectors of society: the government, the free thinkers and the intelligentsia of the literary and sciences fields, members of the secret Societies (Freemasons and *Carbonarios*⁵)⁶ Together and mixed with the Lodges were the Methodists who worked side by side with the formers. They articulated a strategic alliance against what they called "Roman Obscurantism," and "Papism."⁷ The main operative goal of this alliance was the clear separation of Church and State. The alliance of Methodism with these sectors of liberalism and Freemasonry should be interpreted, not only as a communion of ideas, but also, as being mutually beneficial to their respective initiatives. From this alliance, Methodists, who has any roots at all in the country's institutions, obtained official contacts and a certain privilege which otherwise they would not have been able to have, especially in the educational area. On the other hand, liberals and freemasons, made use of the Protestant zeal to both, fight the supremacy of Catholicism in the religious arena, and also to broaden its bases by gaining new acolytes among Methodists.

⁴ Liberalism in Latin America, especially from 1900 on, at no time in political practice played the democratizing role that the European liberalism managed to effect. That is that while the liberals in Europe could count on a strong economic base growing out of a powerful and growing industrialization that generated a vigorous middle class, in Latin America, in general, liberalism was progressive insofar as it expressed its theoretical axioms. But at as they became economically active they always turned to the local conservative groups linked to the farming production the center of the economic strength in Argentina and Uruguay. In Europe, for instance, the liberals were nationalists, while in Latin America, they adopted foreign customs. By doing so they left the patriotic and national sentiment to the ultra-conservatives who converted in a fountain of xenophobic hatred. To be a liberal in Europe or a liberal in Latin America-- positing at one end or the other of the commercial circuit-- was a very different result. Thus, whilst European liberalism took roots as such, thanks to its industrial development, Latin America's dependent liberalism, soon converted itself into a synonym of conservatism. The agricultural exportation project which incarnated the generation of the '80s, condemned the nation to postpone the industrialized basis and so paradoxically denied, in practice, the democratizing basic principle of liberalism. Liberalism in Europe was revolutionary, but in Latin America, once in the Twentieth century, was the new face of conservatism.

⁵ Carbonari (Italian word in English "charcoal-burners") Was a secret society born in Italy by 1807, fighting the monarchy and the power of the Church. See: Iris Zavala, *Masones, Carbonarios y Comunerros*, ED. Siglo xxi, Madrid, 1971.

⁶ Who, from 1870, as a consequence of the ultra-reactionary results of Vatican Council I, started an active anticlerical campaign in favour of liberty of thought and enlightenment.

⁷ The first historically documented deal between Methodism and Freemasonry is dated in 1868 in Montevideo.

The mission has been strongly linked with Freemasonry, not only by external agreements (which are very difficult to find out), but by a Freemasonic presence in Methodist own ranks. During the eighteenth century Freemasonry had ceased to be speculative to become operative lodges to achieve some political ends without appearing on the surface.⁸ By the late nineteenth century in the Rio de la Plata the ideological battle of Freemasonry was centred on three themes: the separation of church and state, the recognition of civil rights to those who did not profess the Catholic religion and secular education, those were programmatic aspirations also coincident with Methodism. In this framework, the Masonic fraternity had occupied an important place not only by helping the insertion of Methodism in the Rio de la Plata region but also in the design of some of its policies, especially in matching the interests and ends of both institutions, as punctuated above.

It is known, for example, the fact that the first Methodist house of worship in the city of Montevideo was a lounge provided by local Freemasons thanks to Rev. John F. Thomson contacts as he remembers forty-five years later.⁹ According to a research carried out for this work, the origin of the link between Argentinian Methodism with Freemasonry must be traced into the mighty Scottish Rite lodges present in Delaware, Ohio in the mid-19th century.¹⁰ Delaware has been coincidentally, over a long period, a reference point for young Argentinian Methodist theology students who since Thomson onwards (1860), were educated at the Ohio Wesleyan University. Thus it is not surprising then that this city and its intellectual environment have been instrumental in the worldview of a good number of River Plate's region Methodist leaders.¹¹

This closeness between Methodist and Freemasons had also its perils; one of them was the blurring of its own profiles. This could raise a conflict of loyalties. This was a

⁸ Ver Emilio Corbiere, *La Masonería, Política y Sociedades Secretas en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Ed. Sudamericana, 1998)

⁹ Juan F. Thomson, *Recuerdos*, *El Estandarte Evangélico*, año 1915, 270

¹⁰ Ohio was one of the states where the most concentrated Masonic lodges of various rites. There remains the only lodge called *John Wesley Wesleyan Council* which meets Methodist ministers exclusively to the Ohio Conference.

¹¹ Ver anexo N°...Lideres Metodistas Masones

recurring discussion issue for end century's Methodism. It is very common to find public statements defending Freemasonry, but at the same time asserting that "*although many [Methodist] may be linked by more or less close ties the objectives of the two institutions are different*", stating that while "*Freemasonry wars with the Church for reasons of political life of the people, Methodist fighting to wrest souls from the darkness of error by making them see the truth and be saved.*"¹²

The strategy of Methodist leaders to justify the alliance was highlighting the fact that Freemasonry was not a religion so, there was no conflict of loyalties, both could work together and even share their memberships. Such is the assertion of the Rev. J. G. Froggatt, in this regard:

*"The fruits of Popery are deceit, laziness and darkness, the fruits of Masonry are charity, light and brotherhood. Masonry is not a religion, nor will ever usurp the place of true religion, as it is revealed in the New Testament, but thousands of Christians more intelligent, noble and generous are enrolled in its ranks"*¹³

When Pope Leo XIII promulgates the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, through which the Vatican attacks fiercely Socialism and Freemasonry. The Rev J.F. Thomson from the pulpit of the First Methodist Church assumes the defence and confesses publicly their membership to the lodge:

I do not know if my listeners have read the famous encyclical of Pope about Freemasonry. I have rarely seen a piece of papal literature so rudely libellous and so obviously false. If I had my residence in Rome would try to bring the citizen Pecci (a.k.a Leo XIII) in front of civil courts as vulgar slanderer. Because it is proving that what he said against Freemasonry, has said against every Mason,.... 18 years ago I'm Mason and since I received the grade 18 swear I've never found what it is referred to in this paragraph,

12 El Estandarte Evangélico, Diciembre 16, 1897 p3

13 J.G Froggatt, ¿Será la masonería lo que el fraile romanista la pinta? EEE, Agosto4, 1892. 7

besides, I state that among the older ministers of the Gospel I have met, many were Masons! This is the most infamous lie I've ever saw printed. 14

Methodism have woven a big network of alliances, not only with liberals and freemasons; later in others stages of his development in the country, we can see him working with socialists and even Radicals, against vices, alcohol, wars and in contemporary times denouncing violation of Human Rights and fighting military dictatorship. In all these alliances that Methodism forged, it did not do it by the pursuing of an abstract and passive ideal of communion of thought, it were strategic alliances to achieve a goal. We can see in this quotation, this clear pragmatic statement:

As an Argentine and a Christian I involve with all who seek freedom of conscience for humanity, equality before the law and its application, freedom of the bonds between Church and State, and in addition to all that is good for humanity in general or to particular individuals, without asking to the person with whom I associate, what do they think or do not think, but what they seeks ...15

This is a very interesting statement over which we could extract many conclusions. So far, we will only point out the fact that the goals pursued by Methodism were considered a constitutive part of their evangelical mission, although for the others sectors with whom they work together, those goals were only just part of any other program. That allow us to see the wide range radar that Methodism had in order to tolerate helpers in mission, without religious language and even more, without faith.

Mission outside the walls

Methodism wanted to save souls and reform society at a time. But the souls would be saved, as seen above, by “*snatching them from the darkness of error by making them see the truth*”.¹⁶ Of course the “darkness of error” was not a mystical reference of the

14 J.F Thomson Sermon, Argentina Methodist Church General Archives

15 El estandarte Evangélico, 1913

16 El Estandarte Evangélico, Diciembre 16, 1897 p3

Hell, but it was Catholic Church and her teachings. The anticlerical missionary strategy of Methodism linked both issues, which actually was the same: *“make the people see the truth”* was also *“reforming the society”*.

In that search, Methodism stated explicitly his public theology by supporting the government as long as it continues with the secularization campaign.

*“As Evangelical Christians a sacred duty incumbent upon us: to do justice to governments that not only promote freedom of conscience, but also has the courage to turn away from the dangerous cliffs that can compromise the honour, the future and national dignity”*¹⁷

Although the final end of Methodism was the separation of the Church and the State, they knew that a former road should be transited. That was the slow movement among political interests in order to approve the laws which would lead the way toward the final separation. They also knew that “a bird in the hand would be better than two in the bush”. In fact, the final and total separation would be a very big bush to fight against (it has not been done completely even today!) So, it would be smarter to start by some leading laws.

So, it was stated in the pages of *El Estandarte*, the official newspaper of Methodism:

“In the name of freedom of conscience, we believe that the declaration of the separation of church and state would be the most radical to cut abuse of clericalism and set free the modern society from the regression that this union has condemned ... But for this measure produces beneficial results it must be preceded by others as has been done in other countries ... it is necessary to get rid the families from clerical influence, our government must establish mandatory Civil Marriage and Civil Status records ... and to declare deleted the remainings of the ecclesiastical courts and their jurisdiction which has no reason to be.”¹⁸

17 Declaración Pública, *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Agosto 16, 1883, 2

18 La separación de la Iglesia del Estado, *El Estandarte*, Junio 21, 1884, 1

Methodism participated actively encouraging those laws; the pages of "*El Estandarte*" became a reflection of what was happening in the country at that time where can be seen clearly the position of the main Methodist leaders on the most relevant issues:

*"Every Christian, every man loving the liberties of his country should cooperate with the efforts of a government that knows how to challenge the hidden powers that still meant to stifle the freedoms of the people in the name of God."*¹⁹

One of the first acts was the successful law on a lay, free and obligatory education for children aged 6-14 years in 1882. This law prevented the Catholic Church the monopoly that up to that moment had had on education.

Methodists' joy for the enacted law could not be hidden, as it opened new possibilities for their educational work, as indeed happened:

*"Last Monday was a glorious day, by 48 votes to 10, the project of secular education (Law 1420) was approved. Thank God the last difficulty to enact the Law has been defeated on ThursdayIt was the triumph of progress, of liberalism, democracy, it was the victory of freedom over the ultramontans' sophistry and absurdity...it is the victory of the gospel of freedom "*²⁰

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church resisted claiming that the new legislation was "godless and atheistic" and their advocates as "heretics".²¹ The reaction of the Vatican, through the Apostolic Nuncio in Buenos Aires was immediate, and this strained the relationship to a breaking point. President Avellaneda dismissed the Nuncio, but such was the reaction of vast sectors of the population that he could retain his office.

It was necessary to accelerate the Civil Marriage Act due to the presence in Buenos Aires of a great mass of immigrants who were coming to the country with different faiths, otherwise many non-Catholics would be unable to legalize their marriage.

19 *El Estandarte*, Agosto 16, 1883, 2

20 "El triunfo seguro", *El Estandarte Evangélico*, 28 Junio, 1884, p.2

21 Emilio Corbiere, *La Masonería, Política y Sociedades Secretas en la Argentina*, (Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1998) 252

Methodism was a strong ally for the awareness of this need and promoting its benefits. The “El Estandarte”'s editor fervently proclaimed:

*“The moods of the masses are ready to introduce any improvement in favour of the ideal to which they aspire, synthesized in the slogan “common law”. Civil marriage is a necessity today proclaimed by all citizens, the obscurantist labours in vain shaking the spirit of the masses preparing them to a relentless struggle.... because the domain of force ends where it begins the domain of consciousness...”*²²

Finally, the Civil Marriage Law is enacted in 1889. The catholic *intelligentsia* together with the bishops, threatened the population by accusing the promoters of the law to be traitors because *“civil marriage is an attempt against the essential foundations of national civilization”*²³ Anyway everybody knew that all the efforts should be done just to retain an elusive control of the public domain, which Catholic Church was losing piece by piece.

By the end of the 80's the most important secular laws had been enacted. As in a symbolical picture, four stages of human life had been covered by the civil laws: Birth (Civil Status Records Law, 1885), Education (Free, Lay and Obligatory Education Law, 1882), Marriage (Civil Marriage Law, 1889), Death (Secular Cemeteries Law, 1882). Methodism has been an active promoter of each one of these laws.

Only one law was defeated by strong pressure of the Church, it was the Divorce Law that was presented several times to be enacted, between 1884 and 1902 without success. In the defence of this law Methodism showed clearly the foundation of his public mission: *“In the name of Christ, in the name of morality, in the name of many innocent and defenceless creatures ask absolute divorce, the possibility of absolute annulment of the marriage bonds for good cause..”*²⁴

Definitely the Methodist Church had adopted as their own the divorce law campaign and although the project was defeated Methodism was ready to maintain his

22 “Trascendental Momento”, El Estandarte Evangélico, 31 de Mayo, 1884, p 1

23 José Manuel Estrada, quoted in Corbiere, Emilio op.cit. p 246

24 El Estandarte Evangélico, Enero 18, 1883, p 1

convictions on the matter. In the Annual Conference of 1904 Methodism officially assumes his divorce creed:

“We believe that marriage is a divine institution

We believe that mankind is one species and this taken together with the experience establishes monogamy ...

However, in view of the abnormal conditions introduced by man, admit the dissolution of marriage”

The theological statement of all this public presence of Methodism might seem naïve and surely it is, but in this context it must be read, no doubt tinged with the ideological excitement of the moment, but also as the development of a discursive construction process which shows an absolute permeability to the burning issues of his time. Political and social field was not strange for nineteenth’s century Methodism. They took the risk, as Wesley also did, of enabling historical human situation to push the Gospel in order to extract out from it new answers for new situations, without foreknowing where it would lead. By doing so, they met others men and women in the same road and they associated with them “for the achievement of high aims and ideals”. This is clearly a challenge for today’s Methodists.

Concluding Thoughts

We could watch these events as an interesting old story contemplated from the distance, without any other importance than an anecdotic remembering. Nevertheless, this moral evangelical commitment of being in the trenches of history, where burning issues are being played and destiny of a Nation is being forged, is a paradigm of mission which has to be revisited for Methodism in every stage of his present and future journey. Perhaps this paradigm is the clearest “mark” of Methodism mission itself from Wesley’s times: going out to the world as it would be my parish, shaking hands with those who are walking with me, no matter what they think but certainly it matter where they want to go. This is a hard challenge, a historical troublesome imperative for our present mission. The Catholic medieval

worldview in our colonies was a totalizing cultural imperialism indeed, against which Methodism fought in the name of a gospel of freedom and democracy with ideas, arguments, actions and alliances. In those times most of the Argentine Methodism was cohesive under a common interpretation of the situation, they were able to grasp the whole picture (the colonial cultural catholic imperialism was a big and complex entanglement of issues that conformed the whole) in order to deconstruct it for finding those “neuralgic” issues with which they could work on it (that was the Church and State relationship).

All that impressive display in public arena has not been carried on just as a free time “hobby” for Methodist leaders, but as the very core of their conception of mission, and even evangelization. They did not divide the mission between a spiritual and a social one, nor did they want to increase the number of membership at any cost, but being faithful to the moral commitment of the Kingdom of God and its justice. Today’s mission concept (120 years after those actions) has been divided into several fictional contradictions which does not enable a full approach like that. I will only refer to one of them:

Identity or Relevance: a false dilemma

A mission out of the walls, side by side with non-Christians, has been stigmatic as a dangerous alternative for the own identity of Christian message. As if the public arena were a strange field for Christians. Jurgen Moltmann in his "*The Crucified God*", he debates on the dialectical tension between identity-relevance in mission, perhaps this is the best expression of what I would rather call a *false dilemma* rather than a *dialectical tension*. Without wishing to deepen on this, I want make clear the point that the Moltmann’s threatened identity is expressed just in terms of doctrine. That old Luther's formula: "*Crux probat omnia*"²⁵ quoted by Moltmann, it is *per se* a doctrinal starting point. For that reason the dilemma that it sustains becomes into an irreducible one. From this perspective, the relationship between both terms “identity-

²⁵ “The Cross proves everything”, Jurgen Moltmann, *El Dios Crucificado*, Salamanca, ED. Sígueme.

relevance” is expressed into an inversely proportional equation: while one becomes stronger, the other must decrease.

Does it have to be this way? Methodist tradition says, no! While Christian identity is defined through its dogmas or creeds, it will be very difficult to find another possibility apart than the dialectical tension of which Moltmann speaks, which is characterized by opposites. The problem is that that dilemma, expressed in that way, is encased in a narrow concept which identifies the “identity” in theoretical (doctrinal) terms and the “relevance” in terms of alliances and historical practices. Even worse, this statement identifies the “identity” as “at the inside” of the church, while the “relevance” is a commitment “outside” the church. This dichotomy does not address the possibility that the identity of the gospel might be given precisely by the commitment and ability of being “out of the walls” , in the just place and time in history where the *kairos* demands, just in the intersection of human dilemmas ... such is the identity of Methodism .

“Characteristics Attitudes” rather than “Distinctive Emphasis”

In this sense, I would like to exhume the concepts that John J. Vincent asserted several decades ago, in his, *Christ and Methodism, Towards a New Christianity for a New Age*,²⁶ while discussing on the theological contributions of Methodism, the author concludes that it is much fairer for Methodist tradition talking about “characteristic attitudes” rather than “distinctive emphases”. And certainly that it is fully applicable to Methodism, whose foundations are not Creeds nor Confessions, but “faith working by love”. In this way, the identity of Methodism IS HIS RELEVANCE. These are not two opposite terms struggling each other for supremacy, but one is defined by the other. The practical attitude defines Methodism identity. Thus, the more relevance, the stronger identity. Does it mean that there is no theology, nor doctrines? Not at all, but it comes *after*, as Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan Catholic theologian states in his *Liberation of Theology* ²⁷, the historical commitment of “faith working by love”

²⁶ John J. Vincent, *Christ and Methodism, Towards a New Christianity for a New Age*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1965) 49-50

²⁷ Juan Luis segundo, *Liberación de la Teología*, Ed. Sígueme, 1975

comes first, the theological reflexion on that experience comes after. The starting point should not be a theory, but a historical practice. John Wesley knew perfectly well this method, because his “practical divinity” did not consist in pushing dogmas into the everyday life, but on the contrary, it did consist in discovering God’s action in history, liberating the poor, inspiring the abolitionists, researching in science, economy, politics, and by doing so he was constructing his theology. Those were Methodism’s “characteristics attitudes” which feed his identity.

This kind of identitarias practices, are a challenge for today’s Methodism which is currently facing not that old totalizing *Patronage Regio* , but an even worse totalitarian regime, that is imposed by a global financial imperialism, which sinks in poverty millions of people just by the click of a computer key. What Methodism should do? How do proclaiming today the “glad tidings of salvation”? Who, will be today those “men of the world” with whom Methodism should be *associated for the achievement of high aims and ideals.? ”*