

“A Globalised and Fragmented World is my Parish.” Ecumenical and Political Challenges Facing our Wesleyan Theology. By Pablo G. Oviedo

Introduction

We are witnessing and experiencing a change of an age, rather than an age of change, with all the consequences that this globalisation led by the Neoliberal Empire brings about in all dimensions of human life. One of them is the world economic crisis produced by Neoliberalism at the current phase of financial capitalism, widening the gap between the rich and the poor worldwide and deepening the serious conflicts in societies regarding social injustice, exclusion, and unemployment –especially of young people. These social and economic challenges also have an impact on the cultural crises in this change of era. And, in this cultural transition, the issue of how human beings rebuild their relationships comes up strongly. It is within this vital context that “a longing for a community, for group identities, for the warmth of traditions, for archeotypical references”¹ appears, in the cultural sphere in general, and in the religious one in particular.

But this longing for a community sense is given in liquid and uncertain times, as stated by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book, “Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty.” In his book, he attempts to describe how social paradigm changes influence everyday choices of individuals in today’s communities. In his prologue, he stresses that these ‘liquid times’ we are living precisely account for the passage from a ‘solid’ –stable, repetitive– modernity to a ‘liquid’ –flexible, voluble– one where the social structures no longer last long enough to solidify and do not serve as reference frameworks for human actions. This new framework implies the fragmentation of lives, demands from individuals that they be willing to change tactics, and to abandon commitments and loyalties. Bauman states that the gradual, but systematic suppression or reduction of public insurances, guaranteed by the State, which used to cover individual failure and bad fortune, prevents the collective action of most of its former attractiveness and undermines the basis for social

¹ Mardones, José María, *¿Adónde va la religión?: Cristianismo y religiosidad en nuestro tiempo*. (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1996). p. 22. . An example of this search current Community, mentioned the widespread media attention of urban tribes among youth.

solidarity. The word ‘community’ sounds increasingly more void of content. “Interhuman bonds, once woven into a security net worthy of a large and continuous investment of time and effort and of the sacrifice of immediate individual interests (...) become increasingly frail and admitted to the temporary”².

Individuals exposure to labour and goods market whims stirs up and promotes division, not unity; it rewards competitive attitudes while degrading collaboration and team work to the level of temporary stratagems to be abandoned or eliminated once their benefits have exhausted. ‘Society’ is seen and treated as a ‘net’ instead of a ‘structure’: it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and an essentially infinite number of possible permutations. “Everything is easier in virtual life, but we have lost the art of social relationships; we have forgotten about love, friendship, feelings, a job well done, and whatever is consumed, whatever is bought, it is just moral sedatives that ease ethical scruples,”³ Bauman claims in his recent book.

In this social fragmentation, religious fundamentalisms emerge as counterpoints and an apparent way out, challenging the ecumenical dimension of our faith. Thus we shall focus on the changes ecumenism –especially, Latin American ecumenism– is experiencing and the contributions we can make from Wesleyan theology. On the other hand, faced with this lack of social solidarity, we believe that one of the areas in our societies that is crucial in our times is citizen participation in the political culture. It is crucial given that various actors that question this kind of globalisation are increasingly becoming convinced that such is the space to build a new way of establishing social relationships and of changing the direction of our formal democracies which respond to the current market capitalism, the way to shift from being mere consumers to being democracy-building citizens. In this sense, in our understanding, Wesleyan theology has got a lot to offer regarding the role that communities can and must play in light of these challenges.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Tiempos líquidos. Vivir en una época de incertidumbre*, (BsAs, Ed. EnsayoT., 2008).p. 8.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Sobre la educación en un mundo líquido.*, Madrid, Ed. Paidós , p. 7.

It is in this context of liquid relationships marked by individualism, privatism and consumerism that we ask ourselves, What can we contribute with from our Wesleyan theology before these ethical and social challenges? What is Jesus' Spirit, acting in our world, calling us to do? ⁴

1. Dynamic Ecumenism in the Spirit

As we mentioned before, fundamentalism is one challenge faced by Wesleyan theology in this age of fragmented globalisation. And, especially in Latin America, it challenges Methodist churches, where “ecumenism has been a legacy and an inevitable commitment.”⁵ In our context and in reference to ecumenism, we are in a period of transition from two decades of ecumenical enthusiasm ('70s-'80s) to a decade of institutional ecumenical winter ('90s), which has now led to a dynamic reconfiguration of all things ecumenical, in which the current ethical challenges primarily outline and articulate the different relationships among Christians and the churches, beyond institutional ecumenism.

To give an example, in Argentina, the historical Protestant churches and, Methodism among them, after that ecumenical enthusiasm together with Roman and Orthodox Catholicism, went through a period of withdrawal (in the '90s) in order to rethink its ecumenical mission and strategy.⁶ Within the framework of the Neoliberal model crisis which left the region at unprecedented poverty levels at the start of the millennium, and with the subsequent appearance of a political alternative of a popular nature, Neo-Keynesian in the economic aspect, churches again meet in the ecumenical arena, with challenges that imply rebuilding the country.

With a slow democratic and economic recovery, since 2007, Methodism resumes its tradition of public pastoral care accompanying the atmosphere of popular participation and

⁴ Walter Klaiber, Manfred Marquardt, *Viver a Graca de Deus, un compendio de Teologia Metodista*, Editeo, S. Pablo, 1999, p.178.

⁵ Mortimer Arias, “Gracia Responsable”, in *Revista Evangélica de Historia* VI(2010), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.152.

⁶ Pablo G. Oviedo “ Análisis del discurso de la Iglesia Metodista Argentina en relación a la autocomprensión de su tarea(1983-1999) , in *Revista Evangélica de Historia* III(2005), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.37ss.

the efforts to widen individual and social rights attained in this period. And while the conservative evangelical sectors have joined the progressive Christian sectors in the struggle for a new worship legislation that does not only ensure religious freedom, but also guarantees religious equality, various ethical issues, like equal marriage legislation or the legalization of abortion, have again pulled them apart. Along those lines, the different understandings of political participation of Christians and some ethical challenges have drawn attention to the fundamentalism in the different religious traditions that threatens Christian unity.⁷

In this sense, the Wesleyan heritage can continue to offer important elements for the ecumenical movement. Firstly, we cannot leave unmentioned what Wesley himself wrote in his Sermon on the “Catholic Spirit” and in his famous calling “If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.”⁸ But I think it is more interesting to remember some specific attitudes of respect –today we would call this “pluralism”– that Wesley had. These are mentioned by Ted Jennings when he sets forth that ecumenism and interfaith dialogue are current challenges to our theology. He states that Wesley –both in his missionary trip to Georgia and in his consideration of African peoples- could see the other religious and cultural traditions as more compatible with the Gospel than his own English society. According to Jennings, Wesley could see the peoples of Africa as a model of people living in harmony with nature and the other creatures in the world. He quotes Wesley when referring to his English ancestors: “Where shall we find, in these times, among the pale-faced European natives, a nation that practices justice, mercy and honesty as it is generally found among the African poor?”⁹ This humble attitude seeking to learn from the –culturally or religiously– different other can offer us a clearly Wesleyan approach and it is a fundamental contribution to face intolerance and any kind of cultural or racist discrimination, and especially, the religious fundamentalism emerging today.

⁷ Daniel Bruno, “ Abordaje y periodización para una historia del metodismo en Argentina”, en *Revista Evangélica de Historia* VII(2012), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.41.

⁸ In J. Gonzalez, *Obras de Wesley*, 14 vols. (Ed.) Gonzalez Justo, Franklin- TN: Providence House Publishers,1996, , T.III, Sermones, Sermón 39, sección II, párrafo 1,p.9.

⁹ T. W. Jennings , “ Desafíos para la teología wesleyana en el siglo xxi”, in *Revista Evangélica de Historia* VI(2010), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.90.

In this sense, another important aspect of the Wesleyan heritage to be rescued/brought back from the ecumenical standpoint is the concept of connectionalism. Theologian M. Nausner states: “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.”¹⁰

In addition, in another article on connectionalism, when referring to the implications of ecumenism, theologian Phil Drake holds: “Connectionality needs a constant stimulus to establish connections with other Christians, with people of other beliefs, and even non-believers. Christ transcends the barriers we build, and He is embodied in many other cultures and contexts. Connection means 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.”¹¹

Nausner explains that this ‘pushing boundaries’ is not to be understood in an imperial sense: “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.”¹²

In this way, the Methodist membership could be understood as an exercise of living at the boundary, where a well-built Methodist connection shall never allow local congregations to become exercises of enclosing or shutting away, instead, “freedom and interdependence with others are not contradictory, but mutually supportive”¹³. This relates to the issue raised by J. Míguez Bonino thirty years ago when he claimed that “if there is a Methodist heritage

¹⁰ Michael Nausner, “Conexionalismo, una herramienta teológica hacia la inclusividad”, *Revista Caminhando*, v. 13, n 21. (Brasil Enero- Mayo 2008) p. 121-130

¹¹ Phil Drake “Uniendo los puntos: la conexionalidad y la membresía metodista”, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Editado por Clive Marshal (New York: Continuum, 2004) p 131-141

¹² Ibid. p. 124.

¹³ Klaiber, Marquardt, Ibid. p. 369.

–conceived as a contribution to a common ecumenical task– it is the search for local and universal forms of visibility that better express the missional and community calling of the people of God in our post-confessional world, divided and conflicted.”¹⁴ He inferred this from the certainty that the heart of Wesley’s ecclesiology is linking the emphasis on believers’ *koinonia* and the emphasis on the missionary character of his vocation. This shows that doctrine relativism, present in Wesley (when he refers to seeking unity in the core doctrine of mission proclamation and liberty in reference to building the church) responds to the binding relationship that he establishes between communion in the Gospel and communion in love. This emphasis on the communion of believers and in the mission that unites them stresses a fundamental issue for institutional and missional ecumenical reflection: communion in the faith is communion in the *praxis* of love.

Lastly, some years ago, José Míguez Bonino himself –drawing from his Wesleyan heritage– when making reference to Latin American Protestantism, and within it, Methodism, in the search for unity and diversity, suggested that it was essential to leave aside all Christological, soteriological, and pneumatological reductionism that were present in an inherited individualism and high degree of subjectivism. This has turned vast sectors of ‘evangelical’ Latin American Protestantism into a space that is “individualistic, Christological and soteriological, essentially subjective with an emphasis on holiness.”¹⁵ And this has brought about implications in the social and communitary dimension of life and mission in the church; for example, a divorce between a believer’s public and private life, resulting, in practice, in the resistance to fully take part in the work of the Triune God. Following Míguez Bonino, a necessary antidote is to place the Trinitarian paradigm as the basis of our theology. Seeking fidelity in the understanding of the Gospel from “a Trinitarian perspective which, in turn, expands, enriches and deepens our own

¹⁴ In “¿Conservar el metodismo?. En busca de un genuino ecumenismo”, en *La tradición protestante en la teología latinoamericana, 1º Intento: Lectura de la Tradición metodista*, (Ed.) Duque, (Costa Rica:DEI,,1983), p. 338.

¹⁵ J. Míguez Bonino, *Rostros del protestantismo latinoamericano*, (BsAs: NC, 1995) ,p .46. Another Methodist theologian who rescues the Trinity as a paradigm of church unity in diversity and love is Justo Gonzalez, en “Confesar la catolicidad, tarea urgente del siglo XXI”, en *El silbo ecuménico del Espíritu*, (BsAs: ,Isedet,2004), p.59-79. Also, Douglas Meeks in relation to the Economic Trinity in *God the Economist, The doctrine of God and Political Economy*, Minneapolis, F.Press, 1993

Christological, soteriological and pneumatological understanding that is at the very root of our Latin American evangelical tradition.”¹⁶

It is necessary to remember that “the Trinitarian community of the Holy Spirit is the full communion of the Creator, the Conciliator and the Redeemer with all creatures in the whole relationship network.”¹⁷ A fundamental aspect of Wesleyan and ecumenical pneumatology, of the understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, is to generate communion amongst church diversity, within the framework and in terms of the whole work of the Triune God in the world¹⁸. From our vision of communion in the Spirit in the context of the whole mission of the Triune God, we make reference to some ecclesiological and mission implications –true material principle of Latin American Protestantism -¹⁹ and in relation to Methodism. Fervour in the life and mission of the church is necessary as long as it is directly linked with the core of our faith, and the evangelical and ecumenical zeal in Christian communities needs to be affirmed, purified and expressed from the fullness of the protestant faith in the One and Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is imperative to recognise and attempt to establish a fruitful link between, on the one hand, the diverse models of experience and life in the Spirit present in every church, and, on the other hand, the necessary resignification of irritating issues in Wesleyan theology²⁰. For this, it is necessary to be open to dialogue, to avoid excluding and unyielding positions, and to grow and walk together from the diverse experiences in life in the Spirit, based on the hermeneutical principle of the cross of Jesus

¹⁶ Ibid.p.110.

¹⁷ See J. Moltmann in his book , *El Espíritu de la vida*, (Salamanca: ED. Sígueme, 1998), p.241. It is recommended reading for an ecumenical vision of pneumatology .

¹⁸ Oviedo Pablo G., “ El Espíritu de Dios: el desafío de la comunión y la misión en un mundo fragmentado. Pneumatología trinitaria hoy”, en *Cuadernos de Teología*, Revista de Teología del Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos- Instituto Universitario (ISEDET) BsAs, 2008, Vol. XXVII, p. 79-103. Also Klaiber, Marquardt, Ibid. p. 178.

¹⁹Miguez Bonino, Ibid.p.127. And as David Bosch says reforming, about the mission of God as reason for the church: "It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the benefit of the world.", David J. Bosch, *Misión en Transformación. Cambios de paradigma en la teología de la misión*, (Michigan,EEUU: L.Desafío, 2000), p.631.

²⁰ Bruno,Daniel: “ Modelo para rearmar. El metodismo latinoamericano y sus opciones teológicas”, *Revista Evangélica de Historia* 2010 vol.6, Bs.As., 2010, Ed. IEMA. p.123-138. In my pastoral experience, dialogue and synthesis are a great challenge not only with other churches but in our own churches. I have in my local church a section of classic or traditional Methodism, one of liberation theology and a charismatic profile, among others .

Christ, foundation and basis for any criticism of any Christian theology and spirituality.²¹ This inclusive vision serves justice to one of the basic characteristics of the church's 'pneumatic structure': Unity in diversity. And it clearly expresses one of the dimensions of the communion of the Spirit that the ecumenical movement must expand, in the institutional and missionary aspects.

The same goes for our commitment as citizens and in the ecumenical sphere. According to Míguez Bonino:

Perhaps in a different way, other movements of our times, such as grassroots communities or the expansion of Pentecostalism in some regions in Africa and Latin America, are also examples of an 'enthusiasm,' of a deep and powerful commitment. As a matter of fact, the theology of mission since the end of the nineties and liberation theologies in Latin America and Africa are a response to what happens in the life of the peoples. If the social and prophetic commitment that our churches assume at the institutional and ecumenical levels is to be meaningful, it shall be so to the extent it manages to awaken churches at the local, international levels and moves them to pray, to advance and participate in different ways, to commit 'enthusiastically' to the causes of justice, peace, global solidarity; in other words, with 'ecumenical enthusiasm.'²²

We believe that, at times marked by liquid relationships, fundamentalism, violence and mutual distrust, homogeneisation, and fragmentation, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue constitute *a sign of the times* towards a culture of peaceful justice, and this is a contribution we must continue to make as Wesleyan communities. The more so when God, through his Spirit, continues to challenge us to unite in the mission of announcing and wholly witnessing the Gospel to a globalised and fragmented world that needs God's love, more justice, fraternity, and peace.

²¹ Moltmann J., *El Dios Crucificado*, (Salamanca, Sígueme,1977), p.1ss. Also J.Míguez Bonino en *Rostros...*,p.115ss.

²² "El mundo entero es mi parroquia. Misión y oikoumene en el contexto global. Metodismo y globalización a comienzos del siglo XVIII". En *C. de Teología* vol. xxii (2003), BsAs, Isedet.p.103. Also Westhelle Vitor, "Ecumenics and Economics: Economic Justice and the Unity of the church" en *El silbo ecuménico del Espíritu*, (BsAs: ,Isedet,2004), p.157-176

2. Global Democracy and Cultural Transformation: Contributions from Political Philosophy

Since the beginnings of the 21st century, there has been a worldwide phenomenon of social associativism that political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri analysed in their work entitled *Multitude*. In it, they hold that the current Empire rules in a global order fragmented by internal hierarchies and divisions, and devastated by constant war, which is its instrument for domination. This is one face of globalisation. The other one is that this same globalisation creates new cooperation and collaboration circuits that extend beyond nations and continents. New and different groups of individuals can partner in networks of fluid resistance to the Empire.

It is interesting to note that the authors affirm that the possibility of democracy on a global scale is emerging today. Although threatened worldwide by a state of world war, by a crisis of representation, by corruption, and by ecological disaster, that possibility is realised in the multitude project, that expresses the desire, as global ferment for a new sense of community, for a world of equality and freedom in an open and inclusive democratic global society, also providing the means for achieving it.

This living alternative which is growing, so-called multitude, offers the possibility that:

[...] while remaining different, we discover the commonality that enables us to communicate and act together. The multitude too might thus be conceived as a network: an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common.²³

Moreover, the common factor in so many struggles and movements for liberation on a local, regional and global scale is the *desire for democracy*. Thus the political organisation of the multitude must reflect a democratic organisation. This is the tendency that the authors perceive in the current resistance and revolutionary organisations, which aspire “not

²³ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitud. Guerra y democracia en la era del Imperio*. (BsAs: Debate, 2004), p.15.

only to be a means to achieve a democratic society but to create internally, within the organizational structure, democratic relationships.”²⁴

These characteristics make up what they call ‘biopolitical production,’²⁵ which us to do “the political work of creating and maintaining social relationships collaboratively in the same communicative, cooperative networks of social production, not at interminable evening meetings.”²⁶ This revalorisation of everyday micro-dynamics, of subjective and interpersonal relationships of the existing social being appears to be a novelty in political philosophy, as it does not dismiss the theoretical means to achieve democracy, derived from the ontological and sociological perspectives, but relocates them and connects them to those fundamental and vital spaces in our existence. Furthermore, it enables us to understand political work as the art of dreaming of and creating a new and possible world with molecular revolutions, from our intersubjective relationship networks. As if it were a display of force, driven by outrage in the face of poverty and by love to the poor, the actual foundation behind the power of the multitude. This is why the authors suggest recovering love –from the understanding of the Jewish and Christian traditions–, as the constituting power of the multitude. They claim the following:

We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions. Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude. Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy. There is really nothing necessarily metaphysical about the Christian and Judaic love of God; both God’s love of humanity and humanity’s love of God are expressed and incarnated in die common material political project of the multitude. We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death. This does not mean you cannot love your spouse, your mother, and your child. It only means that your love does not end there, that love serves as the basis for our political projects in common and the construction of a new society. Without this love, we are nothing.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.p.18.

²⁵ Biopolitics is a neologism coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which generally is for him the style of government that regulates populations through biopower (the application and impact of political power in all aspects of life). To see this concept in some of his works. Michel Foucault, *La Historia de la Sexualidad, Volumen I: La Voluntad de Saber, Siglo XXI, México, 1977, 1ed., 2005 5ed. P. 161ss.*

Estética, ética y hermenéutica, Editorial Paidós, 1999, p. 245. Philosophers like Hardt, Negri and G. Agamben have worked these concepts.

²⁶ Ibid.p.398.

²⁷ Ibid.p399.

It is worth noting that this Judeo-Christian understanding of love²⁸ is not reclaimed from a theological or confessional standpoint. Instead, it is reclaimed from the stronghold of political philosophy, currently aware of the need for this religious category, for this integrating love as the basis for biopolitical production. This constitutes the means to strengthen a democracy in which all of us who are diverse can collaboratively create and transform society. However, as the authors themselves recognise, this political multitude project must find a way, a new science, or a new theoretical paradigm in order to face the conditions of our contemporary reality.

To sum up, from these authors, in the first place we retrieve the notion that *a new theoretical-political paradigm* needs to emerge from this global plural ferment called multitude. Secondly, we judge very important to rescue the notion of multitude as a *multi-citizen network with a common vocation* while respecting and promoting diversity. Unity in diversity, and vice versa, but clearly moving and growing. Because, as Hannah Arendt expressed, “politics is about being together with one another, with the diverse [...].“Men organize themselves politically (...) from an absolute chaos of differences.”²⁹ Lastly, we dwell on the Judeo-Christian understanding of love as the basis for biopolitical production resisting the Empire, which allows us to transform democracy from our everyday relationships. These are three fundamental elements to continue to effectively develop this new political culture, this new global associativism in favour of life.

It is also important to note some criticism toward Hardt and Negri from the standpoint of political philosophy³⁰ and political theology. In this case, it is worth quoting Argentine theologian Néstor Míguez:

In this we differ from Hardt and Negri, in that the multitude per se questions the Empire: it only does so when it recovers its *demos* status, when it reclaims its participation in public affairs, when it

²⁸ Another philosopher who currently claims the love as a fundamental value is for political action is Alain Badiou.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Qué es la política*, (BsAs: Ed. Paidós).p.10

³⁰ Atilio Borón, *Imperio e Imperialismo. Una lectura crítica de Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri*, (Buenos Aires, Clacso,2002). The author rightly criticizes Hardt and Negri among other things, to mention but not imperialist empire. In his book develops the thesis that modern imperialism although not identical to the imperialism of the past three or four decades, has not left his character expropriating or has been transformed into its opposite. He states that "imperialism is not a feature accessory or a policy pursued by some states but a new stage in the development of capitalism", and urgently needs a new theoretical tools.

reinstates action channels that enable it to challenge the closed entirety of the Empire and to break it, transcend it. As long as human relationships are imperialised, criticism to the Empire can only come *extra novis*, from an outsider that points out the boundary. It is here that the ‘lao-craic’ power, the claim from the excluded, from those who the Empire regards as ‘non-persons,’ becomes the dynamising factor of the political time, the announcement of messianic, eschatological times. This presence of an exteriority that breaks into the immanence of the system is the prophetic contribution to political philosophy. Hence, today the Biblical text is read again through a political lens.³¹.

These considerations from the world of political philosophy and this criticism from political theology give relevance to the pneumatological vision –regarding the work of the Spirit throughout history. It is beyond the scope of our work to perform an exhaustive analysis of how an understanding of the communion in the Spirit can enlighten, challenge and deeply nurture the issues raised by Hardt and Negri.

However, in our understanding, these include elements analogous to the effects that Christianity usually associates to the Spirit: communication, interdependence, and respect to diversity in search for a just and participatory community. This is, undoubtedly, driven by the new winds of the Spirit, blowing the world over, the air of communion, this change of age. Communion must be interwoven in each and every sphere –with its own and God-given autonomy– where we take part with our identities as members of a society, of a family, of a faith community, and as individuals. Communion in the banquet of Jesus Christ, who defends and transforms every life that is threatened or alienated. That life that is a creature in his Father’s own image, and the raw material that the Triune God redeems eschatologically.

But, as Míguez says, all that associative and communion force of the multitude does not turn out to be efficient if it is not channelled and crystalised in *demos*, in proposals for political action that foster the political management of public affairs. In this irruption into the absolute, in this *kairos* –where God’s Spirit breaks in bringing about communion, a prophetic voice and the defence of life–, the diverse multitude with a common vocation needs to be incentivised, driven from the Judeo-Christian understanding of love, *in order to*

³¹ Néstor Míguez , *Imperio, Política y Teología*, conferencia del autor en 2010, BsAs.p.9. Philosophers returning to read the biblical text in political are S. Zizek, G. Agamben, A. Badiou, A. Negri have written texts on political rereading biblical texts, inspired, among others, by J. Taubes and Political Theology of St. Paul (Barcelona, Editorial Trotta, 2007).

*transform democracy in our everyday relationships. But this change in social and intersubjective relationships needs to transform political culture and political management per se.*³²

If this reclaimed love, as basis for democratic and political action, is authentic, it shall not be possible for it to dismiss the unity-diversity tension, intersubjective relationships, but, above all, *it shall address the needs of the excluded, of those who are regarded as 'non-persons' in today's global democracy ruled by financial capitalism. This is the challenge.*

That's the challenge, what is at stake is the construction of a new democracy, nonfunctional financial capitalism free market (promoted by their media allies). A new democracy needs to be strengthened with the inclusion and participation of all, minorities and majorities. As like the theologian Nestor Míguez say, "moving from democracy to *laocratic*". Moving from free people, cultured and urban Greek tradition, the people-many of the suburbs, slaves, advancing socially needy in the claim needs to seize political tools that enable them to contest the distribution of wealth .

Let us now look at these challenges from our Wesleyan theology perspective.

3. Theological Implications

Considering our Wesleyan legacy and following Néstor Míguez, in a recent article on political theology and Wesleyan theology, he exposes how "in John Wesley's practical theology, the public arena and public affairs are present and they are the occasion and the motive for his proclamation of the Gospel, as well as for the fragility of the opinions he shares."³³

And this is because Wesley himself was not unaware of the tensions and ambiguities that emerge when one gets into the unstable ground of politics. In his article Míguez studies some of Wesley's writings on political or public issues. These include writings from the late 1770's, among them: "Free thoughts on the present state of public affairs," the "On

³² Miguez Wondering, thinking about social movements: "We have to ask: how far are we willing to go: to be good whistleblowers or something else? Can we also have ability to run, manage and therefore, necessarily, to negotiate and give in? Or for us to negotiate is always surrender? In short, how have strategies that are not only reactive, but also resistenciales purposeful and long term. "Ibid.p.10

³³ Néstor Míguez, "Teología Pública y Teología Wesleyana", en *Revista Evangélica de Historia* 2010 vol.6, Bs.As., 2010, Ed. IEMA. p.39-52.

Riches” Sermon, “Thoughts on the present scarcity of provisions,” “Thoughts concerning the origin of power” and “Thoughts on slavery.”³⁴.

According to Míguez, three axes can be seen in Wesley’s treatment of public affairs: the concern for financial issues –especially when they affect the everyday life of the poor–, the issue of dignity and freedom of persons, and public morality. And when Wesley reflects on the origin of power, as a child of his time and pro-monarchy tradition, he cannot accept “that the people are the origin of power [and this] is in every way indefensible.”³⁵. Thus the idea of the right of every person to choose his/her authorities seems unfeasible to him.

Míguez asserts that “while on the one hand [Wesley] questions the claim for liberty from the currents seeking political liberalism and does not understand that full participation in public affairs is a right of the masses –to which nevertheless he intends to evangelise–, on the other hand, his antislavery quest is precisely based on this notion of freedom and human dignity.”³⁶ This distinctly shows the ambiguities we mentioned before, but we can also see that Wesley, as Jennings said, “saw the way in which talk on democracy and liberty may be used as a cover for the interests of those who do not wish to be ruled by those suffering due to the ambitions of others.”³⁷

In Wesley we shall find plenty of reasons to overcome our individualistic mentality and to base our actions on the political and the social spheres. We see this in his understanding of holiness and how the Holy Spirit works in this process. Besides justifying us, the Spirit introduces us into holiness, which essentially implies community and social dimensions, not only individual or private ones, hence he talked about personal and social holiness. There is a significant contribution from Wesley which highlights *the Spirit as a faith community builder, more than a giver of extraordinary gifts to individuals*. He considers

³⁴ *Obras de Wesley*, 14 vols. (Ed.) Gonzalez Justo, (Franklin- TN: Providence House Publishers,1996-98), , T.VII , La Vida Cristiana.

³⁵ *Ibid*, Obras, p. 84.

³⁶ N. Míguez, *Ibid*, p. 48.

³⁷ T. W. Jennings , “ Desafíos para la teología wesleyana en el siglo xxi “, en *Revista Evangélica de Historia* VI(2010), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.100. . Jennings, *Goods News for the Poor.John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics*, (Nashville: AP,1990),. We can not forget the involvement of Methodism in the unions and the Labour Party, first established in 1900 .

these extraordinary gifts always in relation to the extent in which they contribute to the body of Christ, in order to live trusting God and loving one another, and as complementary to the ordinary gifts –the means of grace: the Scriptures; the community and the church tradition; baptism; communion; preaching; worshipping, among others.

In his objections to a certain mysticism of his time, and recognising the personal dimension of faith, he sates:

For the religion these authors would edify us in is solitary religion [...] Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.³⁸

In his Sermon 24, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount” (discourse IV), he explains:

I shall endeavour to show, first, that Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it [...] By Christianity I mean that method of worshipping God which is here revealed to man by Jesus Christ. When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society –without living and conversing with other men.³⁹

In this context, his statement “The world is my parish” is understood, or his expression of the purpose of God’s work in his time: “not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁴⁰

Also in Sermon 24, and to a certain spiritualism, he responds with a pneumatological interpretation:

I answer, ‘God is a Spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth.’ Yea, and this is enough: We ought to employ the whole strength of our mind therein. But then I would ask, ‘What is it to worship God, a Spirit, in spirit and in truth?’ Why, it is to worship him with our spirit; to worship him in that manner which none but spirits are capable of [...] Consequently, one branch of the worshipping God in spirit and in truth is the keeping his outward commandments. To

³⁸ In ed. Jackson, 14:321. Mentioned in Justo Gonzalez, *Juan Wesley: Herencia y Promesa.* (Puerto Rico, Public. Puertorriqueñas, 1998), p.88.

³⁹ *Sermones...*, Ibid., p.388. We must also remember the whole strategy of Methodism with its *eclesiola* in *ecclesia* (small groups or bands-classes), trying to vehiculizar theological-pastoral option.

⁴⁰ In *Works.* Jackson ed.(8.299), citado en “*Estas doctrinas enseñó*”, Guías de estudio para las obras de Wesley, (Durham: WHF, 2002), p.95.

glorify him, therefore with our bodies, as well as with our spirits; to go through outward work with hearts lifted up to him; to make our daily employments a sacrifice to God; to buy and sell, to eat and drink, to his glory: this is worshipping God in spirit and in truth, as much as the praying to him in a wilderness.⁴¹

This mutual relationship and integrity of the body-spirit, believer-church, church-world tensions breaks with dualisms that Christianity carried and still carries, in part, as Hellenic influence. And it shows the whole nature of Christian faith for Wesley, when he stresses the bodily and social aspects, and the implicit pneumatology. We cannot go without mentioning the social and economic implications that Wesley derives for society and the church, in this case, for emerging Methodism:

May not this be another reason why rich men will with such difficulty enter into the kingdom of heaven? A vast majority of them are under a curse, under the peculiar curse of God, [...] they are not only robbing God [...]; but also robbing the poor, the hungry, the naked [...], and making themselves accountable for all the want, affliction, and distress which they may, but do not, remove. [...]

Crescit amor nummi, quantum ipsa pecunia crescit:

‘As money increases, so does the love of it;’ and always will, without a miracle of grace. Although, therefore, other causes may concur; yet this has been, in all ages, the principal cause of the decay of true religion in every Christian community. As long as the Christians in any place were poor, they were devoted to God [...]. But still remember, riches have, in all ages, been the bane of genuine Christianity!⁴²

In Wesley’s view, the sanctifying Spirit works to move, in the Church and in society, to a commitment to *the struggle for mercy toward the poor and for social justice, motivated by the love to God* against any form of idolatry, in this case money and ambition. Here Wesley insists on the fact that social holiness implies opposition to other evils, such as war, colonialism, social elitism, and, above all, slavery.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid. p.397-398.

⁴² Sermón 61: El misterio de la iniquidad, en A.Zorzín en *Curso de Ubicación Histórica*, (BsAs.: Isedet, 1998), p. 340-352.p.351.

⁴³ *Obras*: el Sermón:”Acerca de las riquezas”, “Reflexiones sobre la presente escasez de comestibles”, “Reflexiones sobre la esclavitud”, among others, discussed in J.Gonzalez, Ibid, en p.86-103:”La santidad wesleyana, aspectos comunitarios”.

It is also fair to argue, as does Míguez Bonino, that Wesley, as a faithful child of his century in many ways, never gets to overcome a mentality with certain individualistic points of view, proper of his age.⁴⁴ To a certain extent, in early Methodism, seeking individual religiosity, personal improvement and one's own salvation was what, in *practice*, moulded the community. A sort of communal individualism, according to Míguez, who also holds that the fundamental failure in Wesley's theology "lies in an insufficient link between Christology and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁵ He also clarifies that this criticism is in a sense exaggerated, *as it cannot be directly applied to Wesley*, whose balance and good sense preserved him of certain deficiencies in his thought, but that later came to be observed in less sensible minds.⁴⁶

One of the weaknesses of Wesley's thought is, perhaps, not having been able to elaborate on the social and creational aspects of the Spirit and theologically articulate his intuition from his own spiritual, pastoral and ecclesial experience –previously mentioned–, i.e. the community dimension as essential to Christian faith, communion as the core of the work of the Spirit. These weaknesses do not invalidate, let alone deny, the value and the deposit of theological meaning that Wesley passed on to us with these pneumatological intuitions on social holiness, very relevant to a spirituality embodied in the present time.

According to Theodore Runyon, modern interpretation of Wesley's theology focuses on his identification of the essence of Christianity as the renewal of creation and its creatures through the renewal of God's image in humanity.⁴⁷ Albert Outler, the foremost 20th-century expert on Wesley's life, calls this renewal of the divine image 'the axial theme of Wesley's soteriology' Therefore, the cosmic drama of the renewal of creation and the

⁴⁴ J.Miguez Bonino, *Hacia una ecclesiología evangelizadora. Una perspectiva Wesleyana.*, (san Pablo:Editeo-Ciemal, 2003),p.34. Also Moltmann, *Ibid.*,p.173-74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*,p83.

⁴⁶ Daniel Bruno, "Fundamentos teológicos de la ética wesleyana. Alcances y limitaciones". En *Cuadernos de Teología* volumen XXIII (2004), ISEDET-IU, BsAs, .p.89-109.

⁴⁷ In Runyon, Theodore: *A Nova Criação: A teologia de João Wesley Hoje*; (S.Pablo: Editeo Umesp, S.Bernardo do Campo, 2002), p.16. Obras Wesley , Sermón 44"El pecado original", en *Ibid*, p.292.

renewal of God's image in humanity, 'living God's image in the world,'⁴⁸ is the essential key to all of Wesley's soteriology.

As citizens of the 21st century and of the ecological age, he warns us about an essential aspect of the divine purpose: the salvation of the human being as the recovery of the original vocation. Being responsible for the administration of creation –stewards–, and co-creators of the new creation in Christ's Spirit. From this eschatological approach to Wesleyan thought, we can see that upon discerning God's original intention for creation in the perspective of the end, "new possibilities emerge constantly (in the present history) by means of the creative power of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹

4. Conclusions

After finding clear reasons in our Wesleyan traditions for political participation in society, even from the ecological dimension, we believe that, in relation to global democracy and the political-economic, ecologic and social situation, the Wesleyan communities can make a key contribution (and can also learn) –in terms of culture and political participation and the defence of Human Rights –where, for instance, the Methodist Church in Argentina holds a rich legacy and tradition.

In this sense, we must revisit several notions in order to address the serious world crisis of civilisation and the crisis of the political culture. Still today, these crises seem to attest to the decline of the Neoliberal Empire that has deprived the great excluded majority of political democratisation and has failed to redistribute material and symbolic wealth. With his typical rawness and lucidity, Eduardo Galeano asserts: "Today's world, this civilisation

⁴⁸ Ibid.,p.21.. See cap.6: "Wesley para os dias de hoje: Os cuidados com o meio ambiente" ,p.250-258. There analyzed the scope and limitations of Wesleyan contribution to ecological theme. A recent work that takes into account the integrity of Wesley's theology is the :Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley 's Practical Theology*.Nashville, K.books, 1994.

⁴⁹ Ibid.,p.17. Ibid.,p.17. Citing Henry H. Knight III, *The presence of God in the Christian life, John Wesley and the means of grace*. Metuchen, NJ.: S.Press,1992,p.73. Rui Josgrilberg Theologian says it is true that "the social in Wesley" does not mean what we mean by social today, but social holiness we see the disposition of a social incarnation inevitable. in " Qual o sentido de social na religiao social de Wesley ?" , in *Sal da terra e luz do mundo* , S.B. do Campo, Editeo, 2009.

of ‘every person for his or herself’ or ‘everyone minding his or her own business,’ suffers from amnesia and **has lost its sense of community.**”⁵⁰

Obviously, the question is how and from where to reclaim that sense of community. If we do not find a path to common salvation, we run the risk of huge social and ecological disasters. We must come up with a *new grassroots notion* of democracy and of society, from outside the margins of institutional and economic power, and not limited by its structures. Hence, it is urgent for us to reach not only a new understanding of democratic participation, but also –as a vast majority of today’s young people expect — for us to take alternative *actions that reflect such understanding.*

Here is where the different contemporary antisystemic social movements and associations play a key role, as do the life and mission of the churches in relation to them. The social and cultural role that the churches can and do play –as real democracy labs— is crucial to fostering awareness, attitudes, and actions that reflect public and social ethics consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In my personal experience working with young people in the church I have witnessed how the wealth of the legacy of democracy we have as a Wesleyan family seeks the common good, nurtures, and trains young people in assembly meetings, in non-authoritarian team work, where they learn to establish dialogue, to reach consensus, to respect differences, to include the excluded, and to make use of their critical awareness of reality. Young people value this wealth that prepares them to interact in the world. Also, by virtue of my approach to political groups and movements I have been able to see that the search for justice –very typical of movements which question the Empire– must be integrated with the practice of love, of mercy with those who think different especially, in order to overcome authoritarianism and uniformity. Our churches have got a lot to offer and to learn, as ‘Workshops for the Kingdom,’⁵¹ as ‘labs’ of a new humankind that, with healthy

⁵⁰ Galeano Eduardo, “Los valores sin precio” (III Foro Social Mundial en Porto Alegre, Brasil, 2003), in *Un mundo sin educación*, Coord.Luis Alvarez, (México: Ed. Driada, 2003),p.134.

⁵¹ J.Miguez Bonino, *Hacia una eclesiología evangelizadora. Una perspectiva Wesleyana.*, (San Pablo:Editeo-Ciemal, 2003),p.89 . Quoting the theologian Curtis .

relationships, anticipate God's original purpose for the human family, to always seek the Kingdom of God and its justice.

Issues like the power-service relationship, the *diaconia* giving visibility to the excluded and unmasking the causes and mechanisms of economic injustice, the role of States in public life as guarantors of inclusion and advocates of human rights, and joint work and cooperation with social and political movements towards a world with more justice and solidarity are now global priorities, for our theology and our communities.

To us, a theological perspective of this reality clearly shows the relevance of the church as a community embodied in the image of Jesus of Nazareth and bearing witness to the Holy Spirit, receiving strength in Communion, one of the hallmarks of Wesleyan ecclesiology and missiology summed up by John Wesley when he said 'The world is my parish.'

As T. Jennings expressed it so well:

I believe that on the birth of new global democracy the so-called Methodist people can play an important role. This is due to the fact that our Wesleyan tradition encourages us to think of the world as one parish, as one neighbourhood, where everyone suffers when one person suffers. We share a common tradition of opposing the wishes of the empire and of building solidarity with everyone who is excluded. This is our heritage. We have probably slipped into a lack of awareness when we have succumbed to the false comfort of respectability and prosperity. But again God is calling us to obey the biblical and Wesleyan mandate of announcing and establishing the divine kingdom of justice, mercy and joy for all the earth.⁵²

To conclude with a word from the Scriptures, what would happen if today the Teacher told us again a parable that would lead us to repent of our insensitivity and individualism? I believe in the relevance of the anti-imperialistic solidarity shown by the one who became our neighbour. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), He shows us the path to face the challenges we encounter as a church both in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue and in our democracies. We must let the Spirit challenge us, and follow the call our Teacher made to us before: "Go and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37).

⁵² "Desafíos para la teología wesleyana en el siglo XXI", in Revista Evangélica de Historia V.6, (2010), IEMA-CNAH, BsAs, p.100.

