

“Engaging non-Christians Seriously and Constructively”:
Academic Inquiry as Means of Grace

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Preliminary matters

This paper is for the express purpose of conversation in the Mission, Witness and Engagement working group of the Thirteenth meeting of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. It will focus on two of the central questions laid out for this working group:

- How can contemporary Wesleyan Christians remain faithful to our own Christian beliefs and practices while engaging non-Christians seriously and constructively?
- How have Wesleyan and Methodist “mission infrastructures” (schools, hospitals, universities, etc.) served broader than Christian communities, and to what extent should we be concerned that these infrastructures remain distinctly Christian and specifically Wesleyan and/or Methodist?

My real interest is on these big questions, so most of my paper stays at the meta-level of exploration. I have set out four sections, each organized by a question and my own preliminary thinking. I am not drawing conclusions so much as wondering out loud about big picture possibilities. I hope my allotted time in our working group can be used to explore the theological and missional possibilities of Methodist higher education as a missional infrastructure. Apparatus throughout the paper is therefore kept to a minimum.

This meta-approach presents problems, of course, because there is no one notion of “missional infrastructure,” or one “Methodist higher education” or one “Wesleyan Christian identity.” Of course there are global Wesleyan identities and multiple forms of Methodist higher education. Nevertheless, these two key questions invite some meta-

reflection about identity and institutions in light of the need for missional infrastructures and engagement with non-Christians around the world.

1 Educational institutions as missional infrastructures

Question: Are Methodist education institutions positioned to be missional infrastructures capable of engaging non-Christians from a Wesleyan identity?

My thinking so far:

For the last 200 years Methodists have been almost as active in school-planting as in church-planting. Most Methodist educational institutions have pursued a mission to educate and serve local communities within a larger connectional system. This local engagement has, in most places, included other Christians and non-Christians, in the student body, faculty, staff and surrounding communities.

In America, many of the non-Christians are nonreligious altogether or are marginal practitioners of other faiths. The increasing percentage of Americans who identify as “none” is well-documented. It may be that colleges have an even higher percentage of “nones” than the general population. This is not coincidental. The privileging of certain ways of knowing has made most American institutions of higher education inhospitable to clear religious identities and commitments.

Still, because institutions of higher education pursue inquiry and understanding, these are unique spaces for Christians and non-Christians to engage together in all fields of inquiry, including questions of ultimate concern. Academic infrastructures offer sustained engagement over time through shared methods of investigation and scholarship. This positions Methodist institutions of higher education for potential to be missional infrastructures for serious and constructive engagement with non-Christians.

Importantly, the academic enterprise requires and forms commitments. Liberal arts education in particular fosters critical thinking that helps students cultivate the art of problem-making. Critical thinking requires one to make choices about how to relate to knowledge, to the world. Learners, teachers and researchers must identify then, at the least, some basic choices they are making about the nature of reality, the possibility of knowing, the natural world, human society, and methods of investigation, all by way of presuppositions in order to pursue common questions. These presuppositions reflect deep commitments that both fuel scholarship and form learning. Education is more than the delivery or mastery of knowledge, then. It is a formative activity that requires sustained engagement not only with subject matter but also with others who share the same inquiries from different investigative angles and commitments. Precisely because inquiries and commitments differ, and are often contested, they have potential to be generative sources of engagement.

The great possibility of the university is that it is a learning space, and so it can offer a wide frame of reference for investigation. Indeed, the existing infrastructure of Methodist higher education provides ready-made outposts for Wesleyans who are engaging other Christians and non-Christians seriously and constructively.

2. The Mission of Methodist higher education

Question: What are the resources of current Methodist higher education to be missional infrastructures that engage non-Christians seriously and constructively? Have professional identities eclipsed this mission?

My thinking so far: The deepest resources Methodist higher education has to be missional infrastructures come from its Wesleyan identity.

James Laney, former president of Emory University and U.S. Ambassador to South Korea under the Clinton Administration, talks very candidly in his article, “Methodism and Education: From Roots to Fulfillment,” about the way United Methodist higher education calls for commitments.¹ Laney argues that John Wesley was committed to the inclusion and the empowerment of ordinary people, most of whom were not part of “proper English society.” Wesley challenged the conventions of his day, “breaking the bonds of constraint and propriety, innovating, doing something new, allowing the Spirit to move through him beyond the borders of what was acceptable” and it cost him something.² Wesley reached out through education to include and empower others. This notion of including outsiders in education was threatening, risky. Bishop Butler advised Wesley against it, warning him that his career in the church would suffer. Wesley had a commitment to inclusion and service and he demanded the same commitment from those he invited into education.. Education empowers and transforms individuals and societies. Education is part of the redemptive activity of God in the world.

Allen J. Moore, former dean of Claremont School of Theology, toured Methodist schools around the globe to identify some of the commitments that have historically been part of Methodist colleges.³ He visited campuses, interviewed faculty and students, and spoke with local religious leaders. While he does not claim to have conducted a scientific investigation or to have reached conclusive findings, Moore does offer some helpful insights into patterns of commitment in Methodist higher education, particularly for theological schools, that can be identified. In many places around the globe, Methodist

¹ James Laney, “Methodism and Education: From Roots to Fulfillment,” *Quarterly Review* Winter 1998-99.

² Laney, 324.

³ Allen J. Moore, “Some Distinctive Characteristics of Methodist Theological Education,” *Quarterly Review*, Fall 1998.

higher education blurs the lines between colleges and theological schools, where scarce resources require both sorts of education to occur in the same institution. We must be careful not to collapse the commitments that may be genuinely different in colleges than in theological schools. Still, I believe these are helpful for our own thinking about colleges *as missional infrastructures*. Moore identifies “distinctive elements and themes that are characteristic of Methodist theological colleges and schools”:⁴

First, Methodist institutions are generally tolerant of diverse theological and social views and are ecumenical both in spirit and in practice. Methodist institutions of higher education are not narrowly sectarian, routinely recruiting and appointing non-Methodists to the faculty.

Second, Methodist institutions give attention to practical concerns—field education, agriculture, practice of ministry, and social action. Methodist higher education is interested in deed as well as in word. Study is conducted with an eye to human flourishing and the welfare of creation. Methodist life has historically focused on the poor, working classes and those outside the mainstream.

Third, Methodist schools have high regard for the place of the Bible and the role of scripture in theological education. This is true especially in theological schools. We might discuss whether and how we see this pattern in our colleges.

Fourth, Methodist theological schools and colleges promote a distinctively active Christian piety which is characteristic of the Methodist movement around the world. Wesley emphasized holiness of heart and life. “Doing good, living in grace, and practicing acts of devotion and charity are ways of describing the marks of a Methodist.”⁵

⁴ Moore, 212.

⁵ Moore, 222.

Russell Richey, historian of Christianity and particularly of Methodism, in “Connectionalism and College,” traces the connectional roots of higher education in American Methodism. He shows that colleges have been joint ventures and sources of connection, indeed, a connectional infrastructure. He identifies four stages through which Methodist education has developed in America, which can provide heuristic categories for thinking about Methodist higher education more broadly.

The first stage, during the planting of Methodism in America, is the Episcopal. This stage reflects the strong personalities of the bishops of the time and their exercising of the teaching office of the bishop.

The second is the conference stage. Between 1820 and 1824 some 90 secondary-level institutions were founded and colleges were soon to follow, founded by conferences or regions. By the Civil War, 200 institutions associated with Methodism. This was a “time when the conferences were what connected Methodism’s enterprises as a whole” (336). Clearly, part of this stage was the expectation that these schools would help preserve Methodist identity of the youth.

Third, Richey identifies the national or bureaucratic stage. After the Civil War, Methodist bureaucracy that we have known in 20th century emerges. Governing structures, boards and agencies spring up. The Board of Education was established in 1868 and was to supervise and regulate Methodist collegiate education. There is an increasing sense that higher education as part of the mission of the general church and part of its place within the national scene, as well as part of its bureaucracy.

Finally, Richey identifies the stage we experience today, the professional stage which has shaped all of American higher education through the 20th century. Richey

describes the professional stage of the development of American higher ed with these trends:⁶

- a growing role of the federal regulation
- the dominance of the research university and its values
- consequent displacement of the integrative ideal of liberal arts
- the fragmentation of faculty and curriculum into specializations
- the increased pluralism of American society.

During this recent stage, professional identities in the academy have eclipsed religious and missional identities. The concerns of each profession to ensure its standards are met has fueled the fragmentation of faculty and curriculum in the late twentieth century. In this context, little intellectual energy is given to “the whole,” that is, how knowing coheres within various fields of knowledge, indeed whether knowledge coheres at all.

3 Epistemic framework for engaging non-Christians seriously and constructively

Question: Do Wesleyans hold that all inquiry has as its *telos* participation in God’s life? Do Wesleyans have a doctrine of revelation that can support an epistemic framework for all inquiry?

My thinking so far: Wesleyans have a doctrine of revelation that supports an epistemic framework for all inquiry and further, that situates inquiry as a means of grace within the divine life.

Wesleyans hold that all inquiry has as its *telos* participation in God’s life, at once

⁶ Richey, 347.

beyond complete knowing and revealed through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷ God is at work, always and everywhere, redeeming all of creation. Therefore, all academic enterprise of discovery and study, analysis and hypothesis, of inquiry and wonder, occur within God's redeeming life. Through inquiry, we participate in God's life, seeking to know and love God, indeed, "to love God with all your . . . *mind*" (Matthew 22:37). This participation in the divine life happens not only in the study of religion or theology, but through inquiry in every field and discipline, from agriculture to psychology, from economics to medicine, from physics to theater. The *telos* of all inquiry is participation in the triune divine life.

In this way, inquiry is itself a means of grace, a way of experiencing God's saving work.⁸ As we inquire into the nature of reality, God's presence and identity is made known. Through this means of inquiry, grace is conveyed by the Holy Spirit. We might locate inquiry within Wesley's prudential means of grace.⁹ When we claim inquiry as a means of grace we pay more careful attention to this dynamic, so that God's grace can sanctify us and our inquiry.

This is not to say that all inquiry is receptive to the revelation of God's life. Some colleagues, theists as well as non-theists, would take offense at my presumption that their work has anything at all to do with God. They might be quick to point out that to the degree that my epistemic framework co-opts all inquiry and inquirers, it endangers

⁷ I found Gunter's work particularly helpful for my thinking in this section. W. Stephen Gunter, "Personal and Spiritual Knowledge: Kindred Spirits in Polyanian and Wesleyan Epistemology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 35:1 (Spring 2000)

⁸ For a thorough treatment of Wesley's means of grace see Henry H Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992.

⁹ For one list of prudential means of grace, see Knight, 5.

serious engagement. I do not leave room for insistently non-theistic epistemologies. I must take this objection seriously for the sake of serious and constructive engagement. That is, I must accept as legitimate their self-understanding of their work.

This does not end the conversation, however, but instead offers a crucial doorway to deeper engagement. In order to take this objection seriously from where I stand as a Wesleyan Christian, I remain committed to the claim that God shows up whether we do or not. That is, the God's grace at work preveniently, even and perhaps especially when we do not make ourselves available to it. At the same time, I also want to remain curious about other epistemologies, other views about the ultimate *telos* of inquiry. This posture of both acceptance and curiosity helps protect the wide frame of reference for inquiry.

Helpfully, inquiry can never claim "mission accomplished." There is always room left to grow within the idea of inquiry as a means of grace whereby we participate in God's life. Because the mystery of God's life can never fully be plumbed, in all fields of inquiry knowledge is never exhaustive and conclusions are always penultimate. A Wesleyan commitment to this epistemic framework for inquiry leads to engagement that is constructive because it is revisable, always under construction.

In addition, this epistemic framework takes seriously non-Christian theists who may also view their inquiry as holy endeavor within the divine. There is fertile ground here to explore with one another whether and how our epistemologies function theologically across different faiths, that is, whether and how we know God's life revealed in all things. Serious and constructive engagement of this sort is central to the vocation of a Methodist educational institution. The infrastructures are already in place

for this sort of serious and constructive engagement. Schools, colleges, universities, faculties, guilds, departments, research projects, curricula, already exist around the world, and, serious and constructive engagement is already happening in many places.

Inquiry, then, grounded in a theological epistemology, is an existing practice of higher education that can offer a means of grace while engaging non-Christians seriously and constructively. As teachers and students adopt postures of curiosity and discovery so central in academic life, this means of grace occurs within a wide frame of reference. Wesleyan Christian missional infrastructures can utilize a host of specifically Christian (and often Wesleyan) practices, including holy conversation, welcoming the stranger, speaking the truth in love, and accountable discipleship. These practices create a sort of communal infrastructure of their own within academic communities to support inquiry as means of grace. Beyond the scope of this paper is a treatment of each of these practices. However, I hope we can discuss and investigate the promise of these and others.

4 Inhabiting Wesleyan Christian identity

Question: To what extent should we be concerned that these infrastructures remain distinctly Christian and specifically Wesleyan and/or Methodist?

My thinking so far: To the greatest extent possible. In light of the commitments of Methodist higher education outlined by Moore as well as a Wesleyan commitment to an epistemic framework that views inquiry as a means of grace, we must attend to the greatest extent possible to the “distinctly Christian and specifically Wesleyan and/or Methodist identity” of these infrastructures.

We must inhabit our Wesleyan Christian identity within educational institutions

toward the end of participating in the *missio Dei* in the world. God's mission in the world calls us to be most fully the part of the body of Christ that we are, and to welcome other Christians and non-Christians into God's life.

Inhabiting our identity as Wesleyan Christians

Many of our missional infrastructures, especially in American Methodist higher education are at risk of losing Wesleyan, and even Christian, identity altogether. One might argue that this is a good thing; that, in fact, the less Methodist identity pervades organizational life, the more open and available those organizational structures are to meet the needs of diverse Christian and non-Christian groups. This view claims that in order to meet people where they are, we must withhold or diminish the particularity of Methodist identity. While this view has valuable insights and is often motivated by a desire to welcome the "other," it cannot be fruitful for serious and constructive engagement.

To be clear, I am claiming that the more deeply we inhabit Wesleyan Christian identity the more fruitful will be our participation in *missio Dei* in the world, and the more serious and constructive will be our engagement of non-Wesleyan Christians and of non-Christians.

Paul's words to the Corinthians make the case for fully inhabiting the part of body we are. Paul reminds them that in order for the body of Christ to function effectively toward God's mission in the world, each part of the body must fully be the part it is. An ear should not try to be a eye, not only because it will fail to serve the body but because it will fail to be itself. This is another way of talking about identity. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?" (I Cor 12:17) We belong to Christ's body and

contribute to its health and well-being by fully inhabiting our identity as that particular part of Christ's body. Paradoxically, the more fully we inhabit our particular identity, the more effectively we invite others to do the same. When we resist the temptation to dilute Wesleyan Christian identity, or to conform to false identities, we invite others to embrace particular identity also.

In addition, genuine hospitality calls us to inhabit as deeply as we can our Wesleyan Christian identity. The things I've learned in my own scholarship on hospitality as a Christian spiritual tradition and practice offers insights for our thinking about inhabiting identity. Welcoming the stranger, indeed welcoming the non-Christian, requires a posture of radical openness. Therefore, many Methodists believe they must diminish Wesleyan identity in order to offer a wide welcome. However, the opposite is true. The host's welcome is only as authentic as the host's own life. When we diminish or vacate Methodist Christian identity, we are like hosts who invite others to our home to feast, but then leave before the guests arrive, so that they find an empty house with nobody home.

We do not serve our neighbor by being vague about who we are. When we fail to be clear about our identity, or fail to live in that identity fully, we confuse folks, non-Christian especially, by failing to show up as ourselves. This does great damage to the gospel because we offer engagement based on false identities. The very folks we hoped to welcome instead can feel confused, manipulated, and lied to. The wisdom of the tradition on hospitality tells us that in order to meet folks where *they* are, we have to know where *we* are.

Welcoming others requires inhabiting a clear identity. We must be careful not to blunt the identity of the stranger by trying to make them less strange. So, too, we must not blunt our own identity, presenting a neutral mask.

Shape of Wesleyan identity in higher education

For engagement with non-Christians to be both serious and constructive, then, Wesleyan Christians must attend to inhabiting this identity. Moore's four characteristics offer some helpful starting places to describe the shape of that identity, especially for institutions that have lost and must recover that identity:

- high regard for the place of scripture
- attention to practical concerns
- active piety and
- tolerance of diverse views.

For this conversation about serious and constructive engagement with non-Christians, I wonder whether we need to translate or revise Moore's work. What would we add? Change? Discard?

For starters, I want to reframe the first characteristic, "tolerance of diverse views." I translate here as "wide frame of reference for inquiry." To the degree that Methodist higher education has resisted a narrowly sectarian identity these schools have cast a wide net for inquiry and engagement, demonstrating a wide frame of reference for fields of study, methods of study and social locations of study.

Specifically, Methodist institutions by and large have not limited academic freedom, have not required confessional contracts, have hired non-Methodist and non-Christian faculty, staff and leadership, and have affirmed religious pluralism. These

practices help to create cultures of engagement that are spacious. This wide frame of reference for inquiry makes room for constructive differences and even disagreement. As a spacious culture of inquiry signals that diverse voices are welcome. It signals that one doesn't have to mirror institutional identity in order to be taken seriously.

In many places but not all, this wide frame of reference within Methodist higher education has manifested in the fostering civil discourse. As missional infrastructures, schools can host inquiry in the common good, offering a location for considered conversation about matters of public interest. Such spaces are not easily found in many contexts. Wesleyan identity has often identified with liberal democracy and its values, including pluralism.

Moreover, a wide frame of reference reflects an epistemological humility that desires to pursue the full revelation of the divine life. I discussed this above in section 3.

Such openness need not result in the loss of Wesleyan identity, as it too often has under misguided leadership. Nor is this openness open-ended. It has a telos: love of God and love of neighbor, exhibited in the other three characteristics, 2) high regard for scripture 2) attention to practice concerns and 3) practices of mercy and piety.

Conclusion: Loose Ends

The very broad and exploratory nature of this paper has left many loose ends. I hope you will bring your own questions as well. Let's talk.