

Encountering Difference: A Life-Giving Methodist Theology

Mary Elizabeth Moore
Boston University School of Theology

The Methodist tradition has a history of engaging and living with difference, whether within congregations or Methodist bodies, between Methodist and other Christian bodies, with peoples of other faiths, or in societal work for justice and peace. It also has a history of exclusion, beginning in early years of the movement: Methodists dividing from one another due to differences in creed or practice; white Methodists participating in the institution of slavery and discriminating against African Americans within the church itself; Methodists excluding lesbian, gay, and transgender peoples; and Methodists drawing sharp boundaries with other Christian denominations or even sharper boundaries with people of other faiths. The challenges posed by difference are difficult to address with a glance at the 18th century origins of the Methodist movement because the cultural and conceptual worlds of 18th century England and our present moment in global relationships are dramatically different. We need a complex hermeneutic in order to make our way in the present moment, one that takes seriously the deep messages of the early movement, the emergent theologies and practices in subsequent Methodist church bodies, and the demands of the present age.

The purpose of the present study is to undertake this task in an exploratory way. The purpose, in particular, is to identify theological, ethical, and teleological threads that run through the characteristically Methodist practices of living with difference, especially those moments marked by tolerance, respect, and relative harmony. Analyzing these moments promises theological insight and practical guidance for Methodist Christians. What emerges is a methodology of serious engagement, a telos of perfect love, and an ethic of grace.

Phenomenon of Difference: Looking Back to Wesley

The phenomenon of difference has itself undergone considerable change since John Wesley walked the streets of Oxford, London, and Bristol. He was acquainted with differences among Anglicans and Puritans; country folk and city folk; and aristocrats, miners, farmers, and the unemployed. He had been introduced to indigenous peoples through literature, as in Aphra Behn's romanticized novel, *Oronooko*.¹ He was aware of slave trafficking, and was a strong critic.² He was also aware of the growing voices among women and the mistreatment of the poor, and was himself vocal for the poor. That said, the explosion of diverse perspectives, ethnicities, and religious traditions was only beginning to emerge in his early Enlightenment world.

Certainly Wesley's world was permeated by contested ideas in academic and public venues. John Locke (1632-1704) had preceded Wesley in England, offering an empirical way of knowing the world, based in sense perception. Susanna Wesley even contested with Locke's ideas in a letter to the Reverend Joseph Hoole, in which she reflected critically on Locke's understanding of human persons, one with which she largely agreed but which she would amplify with an assertion of God's mysterious role in shaping personal identity.³ Immanuel Kant was a near contemporary (1724-1804) of John Wesley as he developed new conceptualities of

the world and human knowledge of it; the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) were yet to be developed. These currents in philosophy stirred the world to new ways of thinking about how the world is known, opening the way to human subjectivity, the individual capacity to interpret and influence the world, and therefore the real potential for celebrating the role of cultural diversity in interpreting and engaging the world. At the same time, religious leaders in England were contesting theologies and Christian practices with the assumption that one could definitively discover that which is true. Theological discourse and preaching in congregations were taken to be acts of discerning and communicating truth.

These currents of new ideas and new perspectives on knowing were new in the western world, in which people had fewer encounters with radical difference and were less conscious of difference than people in the contemporary world. People were starkly aware of differences between the rich and the poor, and among Protestants, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Christians; however, the multitude of diversities ranged less widely and people were more able to live within their own tight circles. The situation in the eastern world was also imbued with more limited variations of diversity than one finds in the present age, but the development of thought and engagement with diversity developed diversely in different parts of the world. Recognizing the many complexities, we can conclude that the 300 year cultural gap, added to geographical gaps, creates a challenge for anyone who hopes to graft insight from 18th century Wesleyan theology onto the twenty-first century.

In spite of these caveats, the differences that did exist in the social worlds of John Wesley and early Methodists were often posed with high stakes. The contrast between the wealthy and the poor was stark, as were contrasts among Protestant groups and between Protestants and Roman Catholics in this time that was less than 200 years since the 1534 separation of the Church of England from the Church of Rome, and even less time since the explosion of acrimonious events that followed in succeeding decades. Theological and polity issues were still contested, and the accents on evangelical piety and liturgical propriety were weighted heavily. Wesley – the great integrator – was often caught between those who thought he was too evangelical and open-spirited in his field preaching and concern for miners, and others who critiqued his adherence to formal Anglican beliefs and practices.

Theological Method of Engagement

We cannot expect to find direct counsel from Wesley's writings as we ponder ecumenical and interreligious relations in the present world, but we can turn to him for a spirit of openness to and engagement with difference. He also offers an implicit theological method that draws from Christian tradition in dialogue with exigencies of the contemporary world, often integrating opposites into a new perspective that holds the differences in a new ideological or practical container. As in many subjects, we may learn more from watching what Wesley did than from the elusive search for a consistent, fully articulated theology of relationships. His engagement with other Christian traditions was a curious mix of study, embrace, and critical dialogue. The complexity has made Wesley challenging to classify and also challenging to interpret as a resource for ecumenical engagement. He was profoundly influenced by Anglican, Puritan, Moravian, and Arminian peoples and writings, as well as those of the first four centuries of the Christian Church and many thereafter.⁴ He valued the writings and practices of early and later

persons including Tertullian, Macarius, Chrysostom, Thomas a Kempis, Richard Hooker, Richard Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law. He valued the liturgies and prayer practices of the Lutheran Pietists, Puritans, and Moravians, as well as those of his own Anglican tradition. Indeed, he developed hymnals, liturgies, and prayer books for his emerging movement. He was also deeply influenced by the Greek fathers, as developed by Albert Outler and others.⁵

On the other hand, Wesley often engaged other theological traditions in rhetorical ways in order to make a contrasting point, e.g., critiquing a particular point of view as “Romish,” even while showing the Roman Catholic influences in his own theology. Albert Outler pointed out, for example, that Wesley “was stoutly anti-Papist, and never changed his childhood conviction that Roman Catholics were still committed, on principle, to intolerance and to the subversion of English liberties.”⁶ One finds Wesley’s rhetoric against the Roman Catholics in his commentary on the Book of Revelation and elsewhere.

Telos of Perfect Love

In spite of Wesley’s short-sightedness and prejudice, his accent was decidedly open to others. In his sermon “Catholic Spirit,” he wrote the oft-quoted words

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?⁷

He concluded that children of God may “forward one another in love and in good works.”⁸ Here we find Wesley’s own hermeneutical principle, placing the love commands above agreements in opinions and modes of worship. He did this in two ways, speaking to the importance of loving one another (attitudes) and engaging in good works (actions), and this accent persists throughout his sermons and letters.⁹ In a similar vein, Wesley wrote a “Letter to a Roman Catholic” during the anti-Methodist riots in Cork in 1749. In this letter, he described the beliefs and actions of “true, primitive Christianity,” which he hoped would be “found both in us and you.”¹⁰ Further, he asked the Methodist and Catholic people “to use only the language of love” and “to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom,” concluding with the hope that each would “fall not short of the religion of love.”¹¹ This sermon and letter are framed within an ecumenical context rather than an interreligious one; however, the sermon in particular emphasizes qualities of *Christian love*, in contrast to emphasizing the appropriate qualities (or qualifiers) of the *recipients* of that love. This sentiment is underscored in Wesley’s sermon on bigotry, in which he closes with a plea that people not return bigotry with bigotry: “If he speaks all manner of evil of *you*, speak all manner of good (that is true) of *him*.”¹² Here is an important theological theme imbedded in the hermeneutical principle of love and the calling on Christians to live, love, and act in certain ways.

Wesley’s anthropology is particularly important here as we ponder ecumenical and interfaith relations today. Though Wesley followed the Western tradition that human beings were created in a perfect way and had fallen into sin, he was also influenced by Eastern divines in understanding humans as being in a continuing process of growing in grace, or being formed in the image of God toward perfection.¹³ In Wesley’s perspective, this process is possible for humans to thwart, but it is a persistent, loving work of God in us and it continues even beyond death. God’s prevenient grace awakens and empowers corrupt human beings to respond to the

work of God in them and for them, thus making it possible for human beings to respond to God's grace and be made new through the continuing, powerful work of God's grace. Further, Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of God, is an offering that works within humanity to inspire and guide holiness of life, and the Holy Spirit works with nature to effect transformation.¹⁴ Thus, the telos of perfect love is a work of God in, for, and through imperfect persons.

Ethic of Grace

The engaged theological method and vision of perfect love put forth by Wesley lead naturally to an accent on ethical action in the world – action that takes others seriously and engages them fully – action that is grounded in a love that embraces people in spite of differences that make agreement impossible. We can look to Wesley then for an ethic of grace, opening to others in ways that counter dominant culture or the limitations of doctrinal or socio-political agreement. One sees this not only in the teachings of Wesley, but also in his willingness to stretch the boundaries of conventional church practices. Not only did Wesley involve women as class leaders in the new Methodist movement, but he also involved them as preachers, and they continued that practice after his death.¹⁵ Not everyone in the movement welcomed this innovation, but Wesley allowed it, and a few men in the next generation defended it heartily, as did the women themselves. Wesley was fairly consistent in taking risks to extend the Gospel, shown by these actions and by his actions in ordaining two ministers for the new church in North America. He defended these actions as important to the spiritual needs of people in the newly formed United States. Again these two actions do not speak to interfaith relationships, but they do reveal a willingness to be guided by the graceful spread of love, even in the face of cultural and ecclesial objections.

Looking Back on the Wesleyan Movement

The analysis thus far reveals a perspective in John Wesley that fosters openness and a spirit of love, but it is important to see how these teachings have been expressed or thwarted in the daily practices of Methodist people in later times and places. This review is necessarily short, but is intended to highlight currents that have run through the movement in its nearly 300 years. Consider, for example, the early Sunday school movement (late 18th and 19th centuries). This was an ecumenical movement initiated by the Anglican layman Robert Raikes in Gloucester, but it was eagerly joined by many Methodist laity who founded and led Sunday schools across England. These schools were designed to provide literacy education to poor children, together with education in the Bible and Christian faith. One can see the Christian evangelical thrust of the movement, but the impulse in the beginning was largely an effort to reach across difference and serve poor boys, who were otherwise neglected and deprived of any formal education. This was a Methodist-supported ecumenical movement in the work of love.

Consider also the ministry of abolition-minded Methodists in the 19th century. The two ministers whom Wesley ordained for the U.S. church were Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, both ardent opponents of slavery. Asbury and Coke together presented an antislavery petition for support by George Washington in 1785, reflecting their shared decision to work against the institution of slavery.¹⁶ Coke was later indicted by a grand jury for anti-slavery activities. Other abolitionist leaders included Dorothy Ripley, Richard Allen, Sojourner Truth, Charles G. Finney,

and Edward Thompson. This movement grew and developed institutional forms, such as schools and colleges. Abolition-minded leaders founded Boston University (originally Newbury Biblical Institute) with a roster of leaders that included LeRoy Sunderland, Osmon Baker, John Dempster, and William Fairfield Warren. Other abolition-minded leaders – Lee Claflin, Jacob Sleeper, and Isaac Rich – later incorporated Boston University in 1869. The same leaders were involved in shaping other social structures as well. John Dempster established new mission work in Latin America (largely Buenos Aires), was the first President of BU's second incarnation (Methodist General Biblical Institute), and was the first President of Garrett Biblical Institute. Lee Claflin and his son William, Governor of Massachusetts, purchased land for the historically black Methodist college in South Carolina, Claflin University. These stories point to hundreds more – people seeking to relate across difference with a telos of love and ethic of grace.

One brief portrait can demonstrate these Methodist characteristics further. William Fairfield Warren was the first President of Boston University, where he also served as Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Comparative Theology and the History and Philosophy of Religion. Beginning his service in 1886, he continued to teach after retiring from the Presidency in 1903, serving as Danforth Richardson Dunn Professor of Religions and Religion until his death in 1929. What is notable here is that Dr. Warren was schooled in the Methodist tradition from childhood in Williamsburg, Massachusetts through college in Wesleyan University of Middletown, Connecticut and then on to theological studies in Boston (Andover Theological Seminary) and Germany. After ordination, he taught in the Methodist Episcopal Missionary Institute in Bremen, Germany. Growing in that fertile Methodist and ecumenical soil, he was not only devoted to abolition, but also to the education of women (ensuring BU's complete openness to women at the time of its charter of 1869) and to a ministerial and scholarly life, which included a commitment to interfaith understanding. He was already teaching and writing comparative theology in the late 19th century (the first to teach such a course in the United States), and he published *Religions of the World and the World Religion* in 1900. His perspectives in this interfaith work were decidedly Christian, but the conversation with global religions was already a high value for him and for the students he taught. We see in this portrait – as in other Methodist abolitionists and activists – a Methodist spirit of opening to the world. Warren, in his unique way in 1900, was opening to other religions as John Wesley had done with people of other Christian faiths and people of no faith in the 1700s.

These post-Wesley stories thus far focus on the abolitionist stream in Methodist tradition. They do not reference the many slave-holders and slave-defenders in the Methodist family, nor the racial tensions that dwelled in Methodist people. These realities were also quite present. Consider Richard Allen and others who left Philadelphia's St. George's Methodist Church in protest of its segregationist practices in 1787, and later formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816). Consider the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church into North and South in 1844. And consider the 1860 departure of the Free Methodist Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church, proclaiming Wesleyan holiness doctrine and the freedom of all peoples, and advocating against slavery. These few snapshots point to the tensions and contradictions involved as Methodist people engaged difference, but they also point to deep theological commitments of love and grace. The inclusive impulse of St. George's Church led to the licensure of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones as lay preachers, even though they later created segregationist seating practices. The strong evangelical theology of sanctification led churches of

the Holiness movement to take a strong stand against slavery, while leaders in the slave-holding South with a similar theology continued to defend slavery. We see here a Methodist tradition that continued to testify to prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, while continuing also to perpetuate prejudices and exclusive social and ecclesial practices. The theology of John Wesley, as well as his human flaws, continued into the following centuries. The theology did not guarantee a loving spirit, but it stood as a sharp critique of institutionalized hatred as people continued to engage in a critically reflective theological method. It eventually contributed to reunifications and rituals of repentance.

Indeed, the powerful impulses and contradictions have continued in the 20th and 21st centuries. While the Methodist Episcopal Churches North and South reunited in 1939, along with the Methodist Protestant Church, the Central Jurisdiction was formed within the newly united church, perpetuating the separation of black from largely white churches and continuing until 1968. During the same time period, people of Chinese, Japanese, Mexican and other ancestries were segregated in missionary conferences, sometimes for language reasons but often with segregating effects. Yet these divisions finally ended, and many efforts to enhance interethnic relations have taken place. The past century has been marked by internal unions, ecumenical dialogues (including bilaterals), rituals of repentance, movements toward full communion, interfaith outreach, and protest movements where injustices persist. In the United Methodist Church alone, these efforts have been carried by the Commissions on Religion and Race, the Status and Role of Women, and Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, as by the General Boards of Global Ministry and Church and Society. They have also been carried by MARCHA (Metodistas Asociados Representando de Causa de los Hispano-Americanos), Black Methodists for Church Renewal, and the Reconciling Ministries Network, all working for respect and justice across differences in race, culture, sexual orientation and gender identity. At the same time, the JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation has led efforts to equip people to speak constructively across difference. The sheer list of organizations and efforts reflects the energy employed by Methodist Christians to relate across difference – to relate in a spirit of love, reflected in an ethic of grace. What has yet to come forward is a theological reflection on the values in the Wesleyan movement that can imbue those energetic efforts with deeper roots and more genuine openness to critique and reform.

What is needed now is a Methodist theology that draws deeply from the Wesleyan wellspring of tradition. This will include a theological method of intense engagement, marked by an intentional opening to difference that draws from the past and present in vigorous dialogue, wrestles honestly and critically with differences, and opens to new directions that have not yet been envisioned. This will call forth a telos of love, built on the affirmation that God has planted love in all beings through prevenient grace and God works continually and eternally in human lives to sanctify us into holy beings in the image of God. Finally, a life-giving Methodist theology will yield an ethic of grace: seeing the grace in others, extending grace to those we name as “different” or “enemy,” and awakening ourselves to the grace of God that is larger than all of us. These qualities promise to foster the kind of dignity that peacemakers name as critical to the resolution of conflict.¹⁷ More important, these qualities promise to elucidate and shape a Methodist theology that is life-giving for all peoples.

Notes:

Abbreviations

Works. *The Works of John Wesley*; begun as “The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1983); continued as “*The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—).

Works (Jackson). *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London, 1872; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958).

¹ Aphra Behn, *Oronooko* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004, 1688).

² John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Slavery,” 1774, excerpted by H. Marcuse, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/2c/texts/1743WesleyAntiSlavery.htm> (accessed 5 April 2013).

³ Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) 85-86.

⁴ See, for example: Albert C. Outler, “Wesley and his Sources,” *Works*, 1:66-96.

⁵ Outler, “Wesley and his Sources,” 74-76; Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), viii–ix; Outler “John Wesley’s Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church.” *Bulletin of the United Church of Canada Committee on Archives and History* 29 (1980–2), 5–17.

⁶ Outler, “Wesley and his Sources,” 77.

⁷ John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” Sermon 39, *Works*, 2:82.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See, for example, Wesley’s accent on love as “the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue.” It is “the first and great command” and is also the summary of all the commandments: “Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable or honourable; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, they are all comprised in this one word – love.” [Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” Sermon preached at St. Mary’s Oxford, 1 January 1733, *Works*, 1:407; cf: “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *Works* (Jackson); 11:29: 366-446.]

¹⁰ John Wesley, “A Letter to a Roman Catholic (18 July 1749),” in Outler, ed., *John Wesley*, 498.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 499.

¹² John Wesley, “A Caution against Bigotry,” Sermon 38, *Works*, 2:78. The final line speaks explicitly and sassily to ecumenicity: “‘Let Luther call me an hundred devils; I will still reverence him as a messenger of God’” (*ibid.*)

¹³ Randy Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal*, 45:2 (1990), 34-35.

¹⁴ Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 35-37; Outler, “Wesley and his Sources,” 75-76.

¹⁵ See for example: Paul W. Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1991).

¹⁶ “Coke, Thomas (1747-1814): Methodist Bishop and Missionary,” <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/coke-thomas-1747-1814/>, reprinted from: Norman E. Thomas, “Coke, Thomas,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998), 143. See Coke’s extensive commentary on his preaching and work against slavery in: John A Vickers, ed., *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 53-65, 88. See also: Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 1:489 and 489 n.39. Coke and Asbury visited George Washington on 26 May 1785 to seek support for the anti-slavery petition, but Asbury’s *Journal* speaks only briefly of Washington’s giving “his opinion against slavery.” Coke’s journal gives a bit more detail regarding Washington’s agreement with the petition but his decision that it was not proper for him to sign it; he would write a letter if the Assembly took up the subject (Vickers, 63-64).

¹⁷ Donna Hicks, *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflicts* (New Haven: Yale University, 2011).