READ THE METHODIST THEOLOGY FROM A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

The Presence of the "Church of the Poor" in the Methodist Heritage

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A Necessary Clarification

Introduction

This paper could be considered the second part of a previous one, in which I tried to analyze the implications of the North American missionary heritage into the life of the Cuban churches with the failures and achievements in our protestant traditions, indicating some trends towards the future.

Now I would like to be more specific on the role of the Methodist Church, relating theology with the socio-economic reality of the different moments in our Church's history. Of course, this paper does not pretend to be an exhaustive one on these issues. This could be a monumental work and mine is only a humble contribution. Much better, my purpose is to provoke the interchange and the mutual enrichment of ideas. For that reason, I shall be concentrated in specific theological aspects, and the main ideas would be shared as thesis for discussion and reflection.

Main Thesis

The Max Weber thesis about the correspondence between the spirit of capitalism and protestantism, very well expressed in relation with the Calvinist theology, has been too homogenized without taking into account the various shapes in other protestant traditions.

In the Methodist heritage we could find a tension between a more popular and a more middle class understandings of our theology and style of life. Let us call these two manifestations holiness and the rationality of middle class. But even in this two approaches we may find tensions and differences.

In the holiness groups there is a tendency to understand santification and perfection as "spotlessness from the world". This is what I prefer to call an inwardly of the oppression that means a withdrawal from responsible participation in the life of society and the searching only of the spirituality in the internal life. This attitude, a clear eschizophrenic dualism, produces a protest against the world, but this dualistic alienation does not condemn the injustice in the world. On the contrary, there is a religious rejection and, at the same time, an adaptation in economical terms, because of their work's discipline, honesty, puritanian ethic and lack of social concerns, they are ideal prototypes for the economic systems. That happens even in a socialist context.

There has always been, through all the Methodist history, a remanent that has expressed a real protest against the injustice. This has been a popular presence of resistance in which holiness is a more comprehensive concept. This
position has been faithful to the Methodist ethic, in which the social has a priority over the individualistic life. These expressions have been a minority, but has remained until now as a sign of liberation. That has been possible because this minority presence has been linked to popular sectors in our churches.

In middle class sectors, which we call the rationality of middle class, there is a tendency to sacralize the capitalist system. The role of these middle class congregations has been to legitimate the dominant forces in society. For most of them the Gospel is closely related to the Western culture, faith is a chaos out of this ideological background.

But in these groups you may find what I call the "prophetic intermediaries", these do not belong to the popular sectors but are closely related to the aspirations of the poor. In a sense, they have played a conscientizing role in relation to the popular movement, but living the contradiction of the belonging to the middle class sectors.

In the last years in Latin America, because of the quantitative and qualitative losses of the Methodist churches, there is a trend for middle class congregations to move to more "carismatic and pentecostal" expressions of faith. The problem is that the lack of authenticity is evident in these expressions, because they are not rooted in the causes that the Pentecostal churches promote.

In brief, these tensions could be settled as characteristics of the protestantism. But we may find these different expressions in different ecclesiologies, i. e., we do not find these different tensions at the same time in all the protestant churches. The "ethos" of the Methodist Church is how these trends have been present in all our relations between theology and socio-economic factors, as part of our richness and inner contradictions. Of course, this is not a "unique" phenomenon in the Methodism, but its real importance is due to the fact that because of our ecumenical tradition we are called to play an important role in the convergence of these forces towards the building-up of the church of the future in Latin America.

1. Wesley's Theology

It is impossible to avoid the tension in Wesley's thought. Neither the triumphalism that tries to make Wesley a theologian of liberation, nor the extreme conservatism that makes him a militant of the most conservative positions, are realistic approaches. It is impossible to read Wesley forgetting such tensions.

In a way there is a coincidence between the Methodism's appearance in history and the emergence of a new plan in the capitalist system. Since the first part of the eighteenth century a new dynamic began to be shaped in the socio-economic system: the rising of the British Empire as an economical power with new socio-economic structures, and the transformation that made possible the rising of the industrial capital as the dominant economic power in the nineteenth century. New transformations in the capitalist forces of production and marketing required new social reshapings. In that context, the Methodism played the role of a social force that contributed to the adaptation of the british society to the new capitalist moment.

Let us try to analyze this adaptable role of the Methodism in relation
with some theological concepts as salvation, sanctification and perfection and the witness of the Spirit.

In a moment of an enormous social mobility and desintegration, in which unemployment and leisure, migration from the countryside to the urban areas, pauperization of the masses and moral decay are the symptoms of the period, without doubt in Wesley's thought there is a tendency to understand these theological concepts from the perspective of an spiritualization of life:

**SALVATION.** The two major emphasis of Wesley, the universal availability of salvation and the witness of the Spirit, could be read as a way to alienate the people from the world reality. When social instability happens, the possibilities of salvation for all, addressing it to individuals from an individualistic perspective, promotes a subjective security. Moving from the social to the realm of private spirituality, the results are always a dualistic approach to the world: the life in the world is meaningless, the fruitful life is to be set aside of this satanic world. This concept of salvation guides the individuals to an alienation from reality.

**SANCTIFICATION AND PERFECTION.** The new process of industrialization that began to be developed in the eighteenth century in England required a new discipline of work. To increase the productivity and to answer the new demands faced by these process, as Franz Hinkelammert says, the economical forces needed a new discipline to be suited into the system. It was needed to sacralize and to legitimize the new ethical code that could adjust the worker to the new industrial production. In this sense, the Methodism played for the industrial capitalism not only the same role that the Calvinism played for the rising capitalism in the sixteenth century, but a role of adjustment to new necessities of production and marketing.

**WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT.** Here we are facing the new birth in Jesus Christ. A new woman or a new man means that each one is responsible for his/her own relationship to God.

There is a personal experience that does not take into account the social realities. Besides the tragedies of this world we can afford happiness and the victory over the death. It is a call to forget the social contradictions of the present world and do not struggle for transforming this reality, but to search the transcendence grace of God from an individualistic approach. It is the appeasement function of religion that emerges from an spiritual and direct relation with God without the intermediary role of the society, of Jesus' incarnation in the world.

Briefly, Miguez Bonino says that Wesley made an attempt to identify and relate the causes of the economic crisis in the early 1770s in England, but "he remains totally within the premises of the mercantilist system and
completely unaware of the structural causes of the crisis" (1).

But, at the same time, a different reading of Wesley's theology can be afforded. If we do not spiritualize the theology of Wesley and try to look into the reality of the history he lived, we discover factors of liberation in his way of doing theology.

The England of the eighteenth century was full of injustice, the hopelessness of the people was evident, the desairs were well founded, the sufferings of the people called to compassion, and the demands for justice were part of the daily life.

In this context, it is important to read the anthropology of Wesley not as an attempt to reinforce the individualism, but as an effort to recover the human dignity, the personal values, and to rescue the hope in the risen Lord. It was an attempt to recover the human beings as persons and not merely as individual pieces of the individualistic market of the society of his time.

**SALVATION.**— A word of salvation in a dispair historical moment is not only part of the charity of the Gospel, but the possibility to transcend the limitations of the suffering reality. This is the utopia that goes beyond the barriers of hopelessness and that allows us to remain open to the hope of God. Salvation is the blessing reserved to the poor.

Salvation in Wesley's theology does not always mean an alienation from reality, but raising up the hope as a way to strengthen the people in their patience to wait for the Kingdom. Salvation also means the possibility to search a "new promising land".

Salvation as an expression of faith and hope, as a utopic possibility to broaden the limitations of a frustrated reality, means also in the people's hand an expression of resistance and rejection to the injustice. It is an affirmation of our hope against all hope.

**SALVATION AND PERFECTION.**— It is possible to read the issue of holiness in Wesley's thought not as an "spotlessness from the world", as a new requirement of the capitalist system to promote a new industrial discipline. The doctrine of holiness was not followed in all its social and economic implications. There are at least three important approaches that could be found in Wesley's theology.

a) Personal sanctification is not divorced from sanctification of the society. We are called to be set apart not of the world but for the Father's work in service of the sinful humanity.

b) All life has been made sacred. Life in its totality should be brought under Jesus' power and the dualistic approach is overcome.

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c) The perfection is open to the future, it is not tied to any social system. Then, a possibility for social critic is a reality.

**WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT.** In the same way, the witness of the Spirit does not always mean a new birth on individualistic spirituality. That is also the way of empowering the poor. The emphasis has been put on the inward consciousness, but not in the explosion of emotions as a cultural expression of the potentiality of the faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the sufferings, the people of God know of the joyful life in the Spirit. This is part of the cultural identity of the people. A great richness could be discovered when we join the work of the Spirit with the liberating cultural expression of the people.

My concrete thesis

Because of the socio-economic situation of the British society in the eighteenth century with the enormous social cost for the people, and because of the pastoral relations of Wesley with the popular realities and necessities, it could be found a dimension in Wesley's theology in which the popular presence moves him to be in solidarity with the poor. There are "explosive" elements in the main Wesley's doctrines more related to the hope of the "popular church", as an expression of the "Church of the Poor".

We are not suggesting that Wesley knew of the socio-economic causes of the situation, but that there are some attempts because of his engagement with the people. From our perspective signs of liberation could be found in his thought.

2. The North American Context in the XIX Century and the Role of the Methodism

It is impossible to understand the expansion of the protestantism in the United States and, in our case, of the Methodist Church, without linking it to the concept of "civil religion" and "Manifest Destiny" in the North American society.

As Robert Craig expresses: "Its history (Methodist Church) has been very close related to the development of capitalism in the United States"(1). Since the Pilgrimages' times with their vision of a "new promised land", to the expansion of the North American capitalism, it was clearly formulated a proposal of a Church as follows: a) Played the role of legitimating the social, political and economical structures of society; b) Was seen as a supporting institution of the system; c) The religious categories were used to sacralize the "new order"; d) The spirit of the nation was expressed in religious terms, the church became the civil religion of society; e) The American society and its style of life were seen as part of the promises of the Kingdom.

That is why the missionary movement in Latin America joined, consciously or unconsciously, the preaching of the Gospel with a political and economic project. And today it is evident how the conservatism and neo-conservatism

forces in the US try to reformulate the ideological framework from a theological perspective.

In this context, it is obvious the role of the Methodist theology in supporting the expansion of the new North American order in the XIX century, but new trends, without doubt full of novelties, came into scene.

The salvation was presented on individualistic basis, but now this salvation was more concerned with a reduced concept of society. The salvation of individuals was connected with the salvation of the country. The United States was called to play a "prophetic role" as the land of freedom. Salvation was understood as a "chovinism": the destiny of american society.

The sanctification and perfection were connected with the expansion of the country. It is impossible to understand this doctrine without the rationality of the market. In the american society, more than in other previous society, the success and the profit, the main characteristics of the free market, were the marks of the holiness. Blessed are those who flourish in the economical life. The economical success was an indisputable sign of the blessings of the Lord. The doctrine of holiness was measured by the categories of the market and very closely connected to the spirit of expansion: the openness to get more and to be more blessed.

The witness of the spirit was the evidence of the choosen of the american society and its "messianic role" to the rest of the world. The Spirit gave testimony to the "Manifest Destiny" of the american society.

In the North American society the churches, included the Methodist Church, played the role of forces of legitimation an sacralization of social, political, economic project. This was the "genious" of the North American capitalism. Nevertheless, because of its materialistic and pragmatal approach the religious feelings of the people always remain as a dynamic of liberation.

Robert Craig identifies what he calls "popular methodism" and "radical methodism" in the history of our church in the US. One of the most lively cultural experiences in this society has been the black religious traditions. Some slight expressions of solidarity among certain sectors in the church, the original contacts of the Methodism with popular sectors of the population, the concepts of freedom and christian charity, could also be findings to be recovered by the mainly middle class Methodist Church in the United States.

The challenge for the Church is how to recover the liberating emphasis in the Methodist tradition. Precisely, the dreams of a "divine society" facing the present problems of economical crisis, unemployment, certain level of poverty, morality problems, droguers and delincuency are more difficult to be sustained.

Nobody can neglect the richness of the North American society, but also it is impossible not to see the inner contradictions of the system that could guide it to bankruptcy. Neither it is impossible to recognise the strength of the conservatism forces in the american society, specially centered around the churches. But this is a sign of the crisis. And not pretending to be triumphalistic nor reductionist, our task is to be open to the utopia of the future, to the building-up of the community of faith that could be taken from "down to up" in our churches. Our role is to glimpse a new reading of the Methodist theology and tradition to build-up this church of the future.
Let me pinpoint some elements in the American Methodism that could be useful in this effort:

- The social dimension of the salvation as an awakening among the people. The evangelistic zeal that promotes "invasion" of Methodist preachers to everywhere in the society, in spite of the individualistic approach, there was clearly stated the necessity of a broader awakening. The salvation of the nation. If instead of reinforcing the idea of a "Manifest Destiny" of a nation, we strengthen the awakening of the people of God, a more clear expression of the popular church could be found. This awakening of the oppressed is part of the church in solidarity with the poor.

- The salvation as the realm of freedom liberates the human being from any tyranic determinism. The concept of freedom is a valuable concept as a symbol of resistance to oppression and dogmatism.

- The sanctification and perfection as an unfulfilled process, open always to the future avoids as much the absolutization of what has been achieved as the pessimism about the human possibilities. A new approach to the human being not from his fallen nature, but as a woman/man full of potentialities.

- The black communities are good examples of how the cultural identity is part of the religiosity of the people. The witness of the Spirit in the black religious traditions has been expressed through the symbolic language of the culture.

There is a challenge for the North American Methodism, a Church very clearly related to the middle class, to look into the future knowing that the poor and the oppressed are the blessed of the Lord.

"The rise of bulk of the Methodists to the middle ranges of the economic and cultural scale was not in itself deplorable; but the accompanying development of a 'middle class mind' was." (1)

The Methodist Church in the US moved from a popular church to a middle class status in 1850. The Methodist Church was one of the wealthiest denominational families in the nation. This economical reality determined a lot of changing patterns in the church's life. We were "involved" by the rationality of the middle-class mind, becoming less appealing to the popular and common people.

Are there real possibilities of moving the Methodist Church beyond this middle-class rationality? If not, what is the role of such Church in the American society? It is possible to go beyond the contradictions and to remain as an space of challenge and hope?

3. The Methodist Heritage in Latin America

The Methodist heritage is part of the missionary movement of the North American churches. Without neglecting the specificities of the Methodist

theology, in the Latin American context the different denominational traditions must not be over-emphasized. More than denominations, the protestantism entered into the Latin American scene as an economical and cultural project. I am not diminishing the spiritual contributions of our protestant heritage, but this presence was linked to the expansion strategy of the North American capitalism. Thus, the protestantism has been part of a double imposition:

a) An economical imposition.- The protestantism was part of the modernization process in our region. One of the contradictions between catholicism and protestantism was precisely because the latter came as part of the new economical proposal for the region that meant a modernization of society more in agreement with the liberal tradition.

b) A cultural imposition.- The "Good News" of the Gospel was dressed with the patterns of the "american way of life". That has been one of the main difficulties in the missionary enterprise: the intention to empty of meaning the popular culture and to impose the oppressor's culture. In a political and ideological way the missionary movement played the role of imposing a culture of domination.

These have been homogenous characteristics of the protestantism in our region: The traditional differences among the denominations have never been clearly understood in our contest. In our region the belonging to an specific denomination is by chance, not by conviction. These theological differences have "too distant from our reality. We have born divided by external forces. Nevertheless, behind these differences, the common project of political and economical domination is clear for our people.

If at the beginning we could find in our Methodist heritage indisputable signs of contact with the popular sectors of our region, in few years our church became mainly a white middle-class project.

This reality is more evident now when we are facing the conservative offensive. The historical protestantism, as it is now, is loosing the meaning for our context. We are suffering a "syndrome of inferiority" in front of the pentecostal movements and of the sectarian groups.

Our Methodist churches in the region have tried, among other attempts, to respond to this situation with these two alternatives, none of them valid:

a) Adopting a "pentecostal style": worship, preaching, carismatic gifts, etc. The main problem is the lack of authenticity of these expressions. If we find meaningful the fact that the people adopt these kind of expressions, for middle-class constituencies with another rationality based in other economical status these become artificial ways of living the Christian faith.

b) Returning to our Methodist roots. The problem is not only the danger of loosing the ecumenical spirit of our theology, but we are going to non-existing roots in our Latin American history. Our denominational emphasis are strange to the Latin American culture, It is difficult to identify the different denominational theological emphasis as part of our identity. Being honest, the protestantism in the past is more known by its contributions in terms of modernization and liberalism, than for the theological emphasis.
On the other hand, it is important to recognize the ecumenical contribution of certain sectors of the Latinamerican Methodism. This ecumenical vocation of the Methodist Church has been one of the most important contributions to the history of the church in our region. It is difficult to mention an ecumenical effort in which a Methodist presence cannot be identified. It is true that this has been an ecumenism of intermediaries, a middle class ecumenism.

At the same time, it is possible to identify a popular presence in the life of the churches. The Church of Bolivia is a good example. This popular presence remains as a sign of hope, a remembering of the potentialities of our Methodist Church to be in solidarity with the poor.

The way to the future does not consist in emphasizing anti-ecumenically some foreign traditions not well rooted in our cultural identity. But to search for cross-fertilization between the intermediaries-visionaries and the presence of the Church of the Poor to glimpse the building-up of a new Latinamerican Church. The way is not to isolate some Methodist doctrines and to call for a returning to non-existing roots. The way is to assume the Theology of Liberation, a Latinamerican way of doing theology, and to read some Methodist doctrines, more a legacy than an existential fact, from our contextual reality. That means, to bring into the Theology of Liberation some Methodist emphasis that can contribute in the process of doing our own theology.

In the style of examples, let me mention some of the possible contributions:

- The tension in the Methodist tradition between the spiritual and social implications of salvation. The spiritual needs of the poor are an indication of the spiritual dimension of life, not exhausted in the social struggles. On the contrary, these struggles are fruits of the real spirituality.

- The holiness as the utopia that makes possible for our faith to remain open to a future of hope. Liberation is always a process to be achieved, is moving ahead in history, avoiding the complacency, the dogmatism and the sacralization of any historical moment.

- The holiness as a new approach to the Christian anthropology, not from the angle of frustration and despair, but as a testimony of the potentialities of the human being in creating a new society.

- The linkages between the holiness of life and the creation of a new woman and a new man. The possibility of achieving a qualitative leap in the human condition.

- The witness of the Spirit as part of our "explosive" cultural identity. To participate of the "feast of the poor", i.e., in spite of the present sufferings, they have received the grace of the rejoice as the first fruits of a new life.

In conclusion, in the present situation of our region, in which the surprising increasing of the pentecostal churches and the role played by the historical churches are two sociological realities, the Methodist Church is been called to play an important role in the searching of new ecclesiological
expressions. Because of these creative tensions in our Methodist heritage, as part of our "ethos", we could play not a sectarian role, but we could assume the role of being an space of cross-fertilization of the existing tensions in the Latinamerican churches. This is the way of glimpsing the future, not to search a sectarian refuge in the past, but to remain open to our ecumenical vocation in building-up the new People of God.

4. The Methodism in a Revolutionary Society

In my article "Despite everything... I am still a protestant" presented in the Consultation on the "Missionary Heritage of the Cuban Churches", most of the ideas I would like to share now could be found. Nevertheless, let me call your attention to two aspects:

a) The economical factor.- In the case of the Cuban churches the relation between economy and our ecclesiology is very clear. At the beginning, for many honest Christians it was impossible to see God's presence in the daily, positive or negative, events. God was so identified with a certain way of production, so when the production system changed it was impossible for some of them to keep their faith. The believe in God was associated to the way of production, the concept of market and the private property. In a sense, the exile was an spiritual necessity: to encounter again, in the United States, the God they had lost in Cuba.

We remember always the questions of some friends of abroad, especially from the United States, who asked us frankly: "How is it possible to be a Christian in Cuba?". I remember that our church colleagues always answered that question with another one: "How is it possible to be a Christian in the american society?".

God was dressed with the values of the capitalist system. For some Christians when you remove the system you are also removing God. The Cuban experience is a test proof of how God has been integrated into a certain economic system. What is surprising is how the materialistic and pragmatic values of the capitalist system have coopted the God of the Gospel. This is a clear example of how an economic system can manipulate the religious feelings.

If the spirit of protestantism has been integrated into the capitalist productive forces, in a socialist system the same phenomenon could happen: Our moral discipline matches perfectly into the new productive forces. To give an example, most of the protestants are excellent workers. The Cuban economical system highly appraises the human conditions and the productive capacity of our protestant constituencies.

We must realize the role of the concept of work in our protestant heritage, but, at the same time, the tendency to be coopted by different economic systems. Then, theologically, it is a priority for the protestant churches to discover the prophetic role of labour. We have been called by God to produce, but in terms of creating as a sign of production and resistance to injustices. Then the categories of productivity, efficiency, market-distribution, privatization and the prophetic role implicit in the concept of work must be seriously considered.
In my experience, some of the Methodist doctrines, in the Cuban context, could play a "role in tension" of being the "prophetic producer" in a process of liberation, i.e., the stewards of God in a revolutionary situation.

The concept of salvation in which the belonging to a community and the personal values of the human being are closely connected, could be one of the most important contributions of our Methodist theology. This social and spiritual dimension of our anthropology goes beyond certain limitations in the marxist theory, facilitating the encounter with the human being in his/her fullness. Our doctrine could be a protest against any attempt of diminishing the real possibilities of the human being, because if in the capitalism he/she is reduced to an economical category, in the marxist theory he/she is reduced to an ideological one.

The holiness as an open process to the future, prevents any structural sacralization. It is a reminder that the liberation is something in the process to be achieved.

In Exodus, the process of liberation had three moments: the liberation from Egypt, the pilgrimage through the desert and the conquest of the Promised Land. If difficult is the liberation, the crucial moment of this process is the building-up of the new historical programme of liberation. Precisely, the fallacy of Israel happened at the moment of building-up its society. The holiness is a reminder not only of being open to the future, but also a reminder of the possibilities of failing in our attempts.

The witness of the Spirit makes us real human beings. The value of a system is not only the strength of its economic productivity, but making people more human. The Spirit gave us testimony that we are sons/daughters of God. The witness of the Spirit is the humanization of the productive forces.

One of the serious hindrances in a socialist economy is the level of the productive forces. Not always the good intentions achieve efficient results. There is an existing problem with the understanding of the "real motivations" of the human being. There are anthropological limitations in the marxist theory that prevent a better efficiency of the system. The solutions are not in some dogmatic approaches too mechanistic. The solutions are not only in economistic understandings. A basic problem is related to the concept of a new man and a new woman as God's stewards.

b) The ecclesiological factor.- It is true that our Methodist Church in Cuba has had mainly a middle class configuration, but in all our history we could identify a stream of popular expressions through our work in rural areas, in small towns and a certain presence of black people.

After the triumph of the Revolution the presence of this two tendencies is more clear, though not in an homogeneous way. Now we may find a group, closer to the lines of the "traditional Methodism", composed mainly by brothers and sisters with a more middle-class logic; and, another group with "pentecostal characteristics" composed
by popular expressions of life. Among these groups there are a lot of contradictions and tensions. An example, now some middle-class constituencies are assuming certain carismatic elements, but with an evident lack of authenticity and full of extremism. This is a dimension of our ecumenicity concerned with the class analysis.

Nevertheless, the Methodist Church in Cuba is being called to play a role in maintaining these tensions in a creative way, i.e., searching for a cross-fertilization between contributions of the progressist thinking in some middle-class sectors and the popular expressions of faith. This is a painful cross-fertilization, because a mutual enrichment process means a radical critic to our own rationality. The "new birth" means to plant and to reap, to construct and to destroy at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The problem we are facing is not to look in our roots for some doctrine or emphasis that could help in our efforts to strengthen our denominational heritage. More than that, we are looking into the past to build-up the church of the future.

Let us not have a reductionist approach to our traditions, but let us glimpse together how traditions enrich and expand the possibilities of this new People of God of the future. The Methodist Church has, through all its history, been enriched by the presence of this "Church of the Poor", in a middle-class institution. There are many achievements in the Methodist Church as a middle-class institution, but precisely this class identification has been part of our failures. Our Church is suffering now the same economical crisis of identity and hope of the middle class. Let us join to recover from our tradition expressions of the "Church of the Poor" as a sign of hope towards the future and a paradigm for the new People of God.
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