THE POOR AS HERMENEUTIC REFERENCE OF THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

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Ely Eser Barreto César
UNIMEP
Caixa Postal 68
13400-901 PIRACICABA-SP
BRASIL
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INTRODUCTION

Which characteristics of contemporary Methodism determine, inclusively, a proper appropriation of the sense of the Bible?

This fundamental question has a guiding function in the reflection we are starting. It implies some hermeneutic presuppositions which, if not adequately expressed, may endanger the possibilities of a deeper understanding.

The first presupposition is basic for the way of doing theology in Latin America during the last 20 years, over and over again mentioned in that context. It refers to the hermeneutic circle of how we need to understand life, faith, and God's Revelation in our history. It is neither the Bible in itself nor the theological system, insofar it's an abstract articulation internal to academic rationality, which define the challenges to God's people and to the Church today. Much of the radical dichotomy between theology and God's people originates from the classic position which affirmed the contrary. Contradicting it, let's acknowledge that our appropriation of the Bible, the way we organize our systems of belief and our spirituality are strongly determined by our social and political commitments, our collective and current interests. As we know, at the spiritual level, much of this is unconsciously
constructed and incorporated in our worldview, and at the material level, it is expressed in the decisions which organize our concrete existence. We have always to do with a sum of interests which functions like a filter. Our theology and our spirituality are projections of our determined social "locus".

Since it is impossible to evade this objectivation of our subjectivity, the best we can do is to begin with the definition of our assumptions, of our social place.

By doing so we may at least unveil the mechanisms which determine the results of our theological performance, making it more self-conscious. This is precisely the fundamental presupposition of this reflection: the first question we have to make to ourselves refers to the material identity of contemporary Methodism, because it is the starting point of our appropriation of segments of our tradition.

Our second presupposition consists in the demand that our approach to the Bible prioritizes the material historical problems of the biblical communities themselves, raised to hermeneutic criteria for our appropriation of their witness. Only then can we look for the Revelation of God in the Bible in the sense of a Word of God challenging our historical context.

Insofar we assume this hermeneutic circle, which is governed by the self-suspicion related to our existential, material and cultural assumptions, we need to be attentive.
to the pervading common elements along the whole Christian tradition and our specific Wesleyan tradition. In this process, our criterion of truth cannot be reduced to the parameters commonly extracted from the logic of reason, such as "coherence of the discourse" or "consistency of the general system of thought". On the contrary, we need to insert this criterion of truth into the consistency of the results of the historical process in which our theological performance is imbedded. Our theological perception must be located on the line of the coherence between the concrete life of the people of God, in our case: the people called Methodist, and its original biblical tradition, in the light of the magnificent Weslyean phenomenon, from which we take our origin. It's evident that this process cannot be reduced to any individual effort. On the contrary, it is a challenge of and to a whole tradition. Since it is a specific tradition, we need furthermore to perceive the concessions we have to make to the broader unfolding of God's Revelation and of the action of the Spirit in the whole amplitude of history. We are not philosophers but we are theologians of the people of God.

Our starting point is, therefore, the real identity of contemporary Methodist people. This way of proceeding will bring us to the fundamental elements of the Wesleyan spirituality such as they appear, not in the academic theologies, but in the concrete life of the people. It is from this historical parameter that we will try to
understand the Methodist hermeneutic, appropriating the biblical Revelation, in order to confront it with the way how the biblical communities themselves have appropriated the sense of history, arriving, finally, through the confrontation of both contexts, to our own appropriation of challenge of the Word of God for us, today. If we search in this direction, perhaps we can arrive to some deeper insights into the problem of our institutional identity, even regarding the instrumental aspects of the praxis of our people, including the way we approach and use the Bible.

Within the limits of an article, we must confine us to present only a few guidelines for this process, without diving deeper into many implications.

1. THE QUESTION OF THE IDENTITY OF CONTEMPORARY METHODIST PEOPLE

We can search for the identity of the Methodist Church either looking at its system of official thinking/teachings, or looking at the reality of its people in the world. But if we admit both possibilities as legitimate, we risk to establish an unbridgeable distance between the "theology of Theological Seminaries" and the "real life of Methodist people".

To give just one example, we could settle, as representative theoretical aspects of the Methodist tradition, the five traditional Wesleyan criteria which characterize the Wesleyan perception of God’s Revelation,
i.e., Bible, tradition, experience, reason and nature. To these Wesleyan criteria we could add the question of the internal witness of the Spirit. What of these elements explain the "being Methodist" of millions of followers of Wesley today? Since there seems to exist a worldwide Methodist "ethos" explaining the convergencies, in a kind of convivial body, of so many national churches in the World Methodist Council, we cannot simply conclude that there is no real identity bringing together the Church of Kenia, the United Methodist Church of USA, and both churches with the Church of Bolivia and of Korea.

For a more acceptable answer to this question, the first indication-sign we must put into light is the awareness of our need of a worldwide theological-sociological research on this point.

Not to forget, the last two international meetings (Nairobi, 1986, and Singapore, 1991) made clear that Methodism cannot be further reduced to the matrix Churches of England and USA, insofar a seemingly de-structurating phenomenon is seen as legitimate: namely, the indigenization of Methodism outside the anglo-saxon world. In spite of this de-structurating phenomenon, defined as such at least by the small group of theologians who seem to control the official thinking, there is no doubt that a common ground, which defines us as Methodist, does still exist.

We must admit that Methodist identity needs to be perceived as a "post-international-missions" phenomenon, as
an element internal to the local processes of tradition-restructuring as such. Only people still addicted to the old central "loci" may tend to qualify this process in negative terms.

What happens historically is that, in spite of the feeling of a loss of identity in certain central theological, circles, to be/to feel as a Methodist is an experience which reveals more vitality precisely in the peripheric spaces of the globe. It is from this new and given reality that the present efforts must be done towards a sistematization of our thinking.

2. THE IDENTITY EXPERIENCE OF LATIN AMERICAN METHODISM AS AN EXAMPLE OF NEW POSSIBILITIES OF REDEFINING METHODISM

Latin American Methodism has been able to develop signs of continental identity in spite of being composed by national and autonomous Churches and notwithstanding some tensions. The Brazilian Church, the greatest of the region, opened a national debate while celebrating the 50th anniversary of its autonomy, 1980. The culmination of this debate was the definition of a common project of the Church. At that moment the national Church found itself in a profound crisis of identity. Most evaluation-indicators appeared regularly negative. Enormous tensions between different ideological groups had to be faced. Precisely at that moment, as we perceived that the Methodist experience implies the maintenance of the tension between profound
Piety and radical socio-political praxis, the Church found again the axis of its identity. On the one hand, the movement of piety was related to the pentecostal phenomenon of the internal action of the Spirit, a phenomenon certainly broader than what is defined by Wesley as the internal testimony of the Spirit. On the other hand, the movement of evangelical action in the socio-political field was linked to the intense "silent" claim of the poor. (1)

Little by little we discovered that the Brazilian Methodism continued to be a "practical religion", in Wesleyan terms, a religion which maintains the tension between acts of piety and works of mercy. Our theologians reflected a lot on the mutual integration of both movements. This process reached the Councils, has determined the praxis of governing of the Episcopal College, was influential as guideline for Theological Seminars, is at the roots of a vigorous revitalization of communities, of a stronger missionary relevance and of the concrete experience of unity in the diversity. It is a significant fact that, since then, reflexions on the Wesleyan tradition became a central issue in the life of the Church. This process has contributed for stronger concret alliances between the, before, isolated Brazilian Church, and the other national Churches of the region, besides strenghtening its own ecumenical comittement.

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1. It's silent because not verbalized and because silenced. The cry of the poor in Latin America appears as a presence of those who have no place: homeless, landless, unemployed.
Along this process it was possible to perceive, with increasing clarity, in what we are different from the impressive national phenomenon of the Pentecostal Churches, from the new Catholic Church, and from the other historical Protestants. In other words, the "beeing-a-Methodist" was recovered in the country, the missionary perspective was retaken, with signs of new quantitative spreading of the Church.

The materiality of similar concrete experiences, multiplied along the different regions of our world, has to be seriously taken into account when we try to characterize Methodism as a universal phenomenon.

A provisional conclusion may be put forward: i.e. that contemporary Methodism finds ideal conditions of self-expression in those societies which preserve analogies with the British context of the XVIII Century, that is to say, where the search for spirituality becomes integrated with the openness to the concrete clamor of the poor. This hypothesis is grounded in the historical experience that Wesleyan spirituality integrates radical acts of piety with radical works of mercy and finds its best and most visible expression in the service of the poor, looking for the overcoming of their situation of poverty. It's obvious that this orientation acquires connotations quite distinct from those perceived by Wesley, insofar "mercy" today demands the overcoming of individual charity acts, and requires a new priority for the global issues regarding the search of a new
justice for the construction of a new human, brotherly/sisterly and solidary society.

If we put the problem of identity within this framework, we will be confronted with the basic hermeneutic question of the Methodist phenomenon: precisely the question emerging from a spirituality which does not prioritize the sacred places in themselves, because it has a radical social commitment for the poor; but, at the same time, it is unable to loose itself in pure secularism, because it acknowledges its sources in the God of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Ghost. Therefore it is able to restore the spaces for piety, like cult and prayer, in a new context of missionary engagement.

3. A WESLEYAN HERMENEUTIC TO OPEN THE SENSE OF THE BIBLE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The definition of our hermeneutic "locus", which emerges from our ecclesial identity, is the expedient for accessing the questions we point toward the biblical world. Is it possible to sintonize the "Wesleyan process" with the "biblical process"?

In Latin America, our answer is affirmative.

First of all, because we realize that the social and political time of Wesley has many analogies with the dramatic historical process undergone by the biblical people, in the Old and New Testaments. Our hermeneutics
have the same nature of that employed by the characters of
the biblical world. (2)

Secondly, the insight that there exists a syntony
between the "Wesleyan process" and the "biblical process",
on the one hand, imprints a deeper sense to the action of
the Church and the Christian, and on the other hand, it
contributes to the concrete efficiency of the missionary
projects of our communities.

Let us have a closer look to this point.

The binomial "piety" and "mercy", which, of course,
acquires different contextualizations according to different
historical moments, allows a global approach to the biblical
world. Many expressions of piety of the biblical world
revest often a kind of a radicality, which provokes
embarrassment to large contemporary sectors used to forms
of rationality where the search for objectivity leads to
underline the so called "scientific" instead of the
humanizing aspects. (3)

The expressions of piety of the biblical world need
to be understood as intrinsic to the historical movement
where they originated, and not as instances of a primitive
society. On the contrary, we have to do with authentic

2. César, E.E.B. _fé como acção na história._ Hermenêutica
do NT no contexto da América Latina. São Paulo
3. We mention the word "scientific" in order to emphasize
the dogmatic characteristics of a rationality which focus
exclusively on the self-coherence of systemic constructs.
Besides intrinsically abstract, the underlying
positivistic schemes, need to preserve a suitable
distance from the contradictions which determine
mankind's life and history.
expressions of a humanity which does not admit to remain confined within the rhythm of natural cycles.

The project of the Hebrew people, as we know it from the Bible, is motivationally nourished by the dream, although always distant, of the emergence of a communal society with plenty milk and honey; of collective ownership of the land which necessarily would return to the previous owners in the "times of grace", as the Jubilee; of a society governed by kings loyal to God and, therefore, devoted to the people, attentive to the rights of the unprotected, such as the poor and the widows. This "perfect" society, dreamed by the messianic projects, was based on the faith in Jahwe, the God of life, as the God in alliance with his people, the Father-God who acknowledge equality to all family members. This faith has inspired ethical and moral codes which, ultimately, tried to illegitimize any social power which excluded brothers/sisters. In the light of this faith, the pure legitimacy of the concentration of wealth was basically avoided.

Peoples could be characterized as inimical insofar there were discrepancies in relation to the Hebrew faith in this God of history. The foreign social models, a constant temptation for the ruling groups, for using them to break the pact of absolute solidarity, were seen as evil because they were incompatible with the more foundational notion of the God of social alliance.
In the history of that people, the commitment to the everlasting memory of God's mercy produced specific forms of piety. Not always the people remained faithful to this original conception of spirituality, but the defenders of the tradition of the fathers took it always as a central reference.

It's the perception of the radicality of this project which explains the praxis of Jesus Christ. His radical concept of justice was inspired by the faith in God, Father of all humankind, and by the affirmation of life as universal patrimony. That's why his first missionary option was for the little ones, the "sheep without shepherd".

It's impossible to arrive to a global understanding of the historical phenomenon called Jesus, the Revelator of the Father, outside the context of his Nazarene origin, in opposition to Jerusalem and to the centrality of its power, which resulted in an increase of that oppression which the organization of the Roman empire already implied; or outside the context of that option which led Him to gather his group of disciples in an open conflict with the priestly class and associated religious groups. Why?

All this suggests the conclusion that the source of Jesus' piety was precisely the tragic and unacceptable presence of the poor, beginning with the Jew-poor, and including the poor people in general. For Jesus, the alliance of God is an alliance of life and justice, expressed in the blessedness of the poor.
If we look for the dominant aspects or spirituality in the biblical mosaic, let's not be surprised if we find out that the most underlined one regards the spirituality of the poor and historically marginalized people. Furthermore, it's this spirituality which excels, like the highest concentration focus, in Jesus of Nazareth. It's in this sense that we dare to affirm that the whole Bible, and the spirituality expressed by it, is the "historical memory of the poor". (4)

In this perspective, on the very line of Methodist identity, there appears today a strong interrelation between Wesleyan spirituality and spirituality of the biblical world. Although the first source of Wesleyan spirituality was the personal and subjective search for the certainty of salvation and the transcendental and privileged relationship with God, it has created a peculiar Christian identity when accepting to break with the established values. In other words, it accepts the rupture/tension between the sacred place of official cult and the specific place of the workers in the mines and the people on the street, a rupture between a clerical ecclesiality and the ecclesial forms of laypeople societies. This implies a spirituality, at least, open to the poor.

We suspect that the fecundity of the Methodist movement consists precisely in this analogic relation between the spirituality it put forward and the spirituality of the Bible which inspired it. In both, the consistency emerges from that sensibility which prioritizes the claim of the poor among the other historical "claims". In this sense, Wesleyan hermeneutics is confirmed and amplified by the predominant hermeneutic axis of the Bible, if we really understand this hermeneutic as derived from a spirituality which emerges from the cause of the poor, precisely because this cause is also God's cause. In historical terms, there is a substantial unity between the love of God and the love of our neighbours. We love the neighbour because we love God, or better saying, we love God because we love our neighbour.

We began asking about the contemporary Methodist identity. At the same time, we opened the door to a deeper understanding of God's revelation in the Bible, connecting this point with a better comprehension of our confessional identity, which appeared in a more radical way in it's relation with the biblical spirituality, which impells it to focus on the blessedness of the poor. This approach brings us to a more radical perception of the Wesleyan message as good-news for the poor, and at the same time opens our eyes for the massive presence of the poor and their cause in the biblical world.
CONCLUSION

If we admit Wesleyan that identity concentrates on a specific kind of spirituality, a spirituality which contains two phenomena usually distinct, i.e. the radicality of the acts of piety and the radicality of the works of mercy, we reach the conclusion that the centrality of the problem of the poor is not yet mechanically obvious. It's circumstantial and imposes itself from the actual cry of the poor in our societies. It could appear that the presence of the poor, which has so much to do with the Methodist tradition, is introduced in a certain way from outside.

Although we can verify, along the history of our tradition, that sometimes other elements have been presented as characteristic of the "Wesleyan ethos", the question of the poor imposes itself as central in the Wesleyan tradition since its origins, even if this aspect was not sufficiently underlined by Methodist theologians.

It's well known that the attention to this point becomes weaker and dilutes within societies and human groups without sensibility to the clamor of the poor. That's the reason why we need an urgent evaluation of the concrete Methodist phenomena today in the light of the suggested hermeneutics. What happens to these groups when they lose contact with the horizon of the poor? Are their experiences of piety authentic and healthy? What's the articulation of their missionary engagements? And an extremely serious
point: what must be said about the misappropriation of the biblical expressions of God's Revelation by those groups? In relation to this, we need to see clearly that expressions of unilateral and unauthentic piety may appear in the Methodism of "central" countries as well as in the peripheric ones, since the mechanisms obscuring the reality of the poor are tremendously powerful.

On the line of this reflexion, some questions appear as unavoidable and some perspective become plausible.

The problem of the poor, as a fundamental element in Methodist spirituality, has not been admitted as such along the Wesleyan tradition. Nevertheless it was present in decisive historical moments. Besides, the expressions of mercy cannot be reduced exclusively to the needs of the poor. Along the Methodist tradition, mercy was reconceptualized as human solidarity in general. Despite this fact, we cannot ignore that the Methodist movement becomes more consistent when and where the challenges of the problems of the poor become objectively clear and have to be faced more directly. And if it happens this way, it's because the Methodist movement pretends to be a practical religion, which considers the expressions of mercy as its strongest dynamics, and does not define itself as just a religious articulation around a corpus of doctrines.

Today the problem of the poor has become crucial worldwide. The North-South relations are worsening. While vast majorities are seen as "useless" and "expendable" in
productive terms, groups among the excluded and marginalized are presenting the bill of the "social costs" to the so called developed societies. In such a context, the Methodist Church may be "naturally" vocationed and equipped for a more significant action in today's world, in the central as well as in the peripheric countries.

Ely Eser Barreto César