

Life with a Teleological Orientation

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"Questions abound!" I will not have the answers, for I am a theologian with no special education in economics or politics, I am busy with many tasks arising from a new situation in central Europe which affects our seminary, and I don't see any short connection between Wesley's ethics and the situation of the poor in the first, second, and third worlds. What I shall try is to share some of my reflections about the subject of this evening session as it was proposed by its chairpersons.

Poverty is growing in my country - not only in the Eastern part, but especially there; and the majority of our leading politicians become aware of this urgent problem only in these weeks, when the social unrest makes itself heard more loudly by the foundation of so-called "committees for justice". And I realize that we in the "first world", and again especially in Germany with its comparatively new economic problems caused by the unification, must not forget the more justly so called poor people in the third world countries. But the essence and the character - though not the degree, which of course is not at all unessential - of the injury to and the humiliation of the poor is very similar in any society in this world. If we dug deeper into the ground of social tensions, caused by poverty, we may find the same deficiencies of human behaviour and being. The perspective of a first world theologian, even if he/she tries to be well informed about global problems and interdependencies, must necessarily be limited by the lack of experience of poverty, justly so called. My memories of the time during the flight of my family, which vainly tried to escape

the Red Army, and of our existence as refugees in West-Germany during the fifties, have given me a kind of awareness of social problems, which keeps me from talking about poverty like a blind man about colours.

Three aspects, I shall rather indicate than describe extensively, may outline my approach to the questions raised by the subject of our discussion tonight.

### 1 The undestructable image of God

Wesley's theological and practical interpretation of the image of God went beyond and included more than the Reformation theology had affirmed; it opened up a new personal and societal reality; it transformed not only the individual and his/her convictions, but the whole of their lives. It made the gospel an every day experience, where solidarity and a deep feeling of (self)respect were not exceptional. This interpretation encompasses both: (1) the renewal of the person and (2) the renewal of the society - consisting of persons, without being just an addition of individuals.

1.1 The first aspect is often related to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith; therefore, my predecessors in this series of papers may have discussed this point thoroughly: it is God's undeserved love which makes us children of God, renewing in us this unique relation of being God's images, God's partners in creation. Thus, I shall concentrate on the other context, in which the paradigm of God's image can and should be recognized: the life-long journey of spiritual and human maturation. This process, initiated by and essentially connected with God's justifying and

sanctifying grace, was strongly emphasized by Wesley, and it is this understanding of sanctification which he thinks of, when he calls it the special deposit entrusted to the Methodists. Ted Runyon described exactly what Wesley probably imagined: "Sanctification beckons toward ever completer renewal of the image of God in the creature and ever greater participation in the mind of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Where is the starting point? No doubt for Wesley: all human beings have an immortal soul, are created in God's image, and - in spite of his harsh descriptions of the "very image of the devil" and the "image of the beasts that perish"<sup>2</sup> - by God's prevenient grace have

*not lost this image completely. Only on this ground, Wesley's appeals to non-believers make sense. Recent exegetical and theological reflections have proved that the assumption of God's image, being completely destroyed or lost by the influence of sin, is neither biblically correct nor logically consistent.<sup>3</sup> If it is true that all persons will be called to account in God's final judgement, they*

<sup>1</sup> Letter to this group.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon 45, The New Birth, Sermons ed.Outler, vol.II, p.190. Perhaps these expressions are a kind of "boundary conceptions" (?), which can be found already in early Judaism, to emphasize the deep reaching power of original sin.

<sup>3</sup> "Die Vorstellung von einem Verlust der Gottesebenbildlichkeit des Menschen, die in den biblischen Texten keinen Anhalt findet, wird in der neueren evangelischen Theologie ... nicht mehr vertreten... Weder im Alten noch im Neuen Testament, auch bei Paulus nicht, wird davon gesprochen, daß das Ebenbild Gottes infolge der Sünde oder durch sie zerstört worden sei...Die im Frühjudentum wurzelnde Vorstellung, 'daß man mit dem Verlust der Gottesebenbildlichkeit zum Tier wird, d.h. daß man damit zugleich die Gotteserkenntnis und die ethische Erkenntnis verliert,' hat im Laufe der Dogmengeschichte verschiedene christliche Analogien ...gefunden... Sowohl eine genauere Auslegung der biblischen Belegstellen als auch eine konsistente dogmatische Interpretation der Imago-Dei-Lehre haben zur Trennung von dieser überlieferten Theorie geführt." (M.Marquardt, Imago Dei als Leitbild der Heiligung, in: Unsere Welt - Gottes Schöpfung, Marburg 1992).

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cannot appear in court as (images of) devils or beasts. Wesley's argument against slave-trade and other social injustices is convincing only on the theological-anthropological basis, that all persons are endowed with an undestroyable dignity, that cannot be lost although violated by other persons. *But is this intrinsic to the person or to God?*

This concept is hardly to be overestimated in a time like human dignity is being endangered and threatened to an appalling extent. The Nazi murderers were able to perform their unimaginable work of destruction partly because they had created an almost perfect system of total control, but even more by indoctrinating the people with the conviction of the "Aryan" superiority over the Jewish and of the "subhuman" character of Jews, Gipsies, and Homosexuals. It seemed acceptable to allow "pernicious insects" to be eliminated. This kind of ideological dehumanization is - in a less perfidious degree perhaps - a widely spread means of making oppression and killing morally justifiable.

### 1.2 The renewal of the society

Closely connected and essentially interdependent with this personal aspect of a human life in dignity and self-respect is the societal one. A few weeks ago, a Brazilian Methodist pastor was visiting our churches in Germany, reporting on the life of the Evangelical Methodist Church in her country. As a coloured woman she spoke about the feelings of inferiority she and her fellow-women were suffering from: "We live on the periphery, in the overcrowded blocks, in the slums, on the streets. We are the majority on this continent, but we are treated as a minority." And she added, witnessing to the new perspective which the faith in Christ had given to her and others:

"We participate in the people's movement, in the struggle for life."<sup>4</sup>  
The poor are no longer a mere object in the hands of those who have the power to decide their fate; they become "subjects", i.e. acting persons, joined by the will of fighting for better living conditions and a just share of their country's resources. "God works, therefore you can work. God works, therefore you must work." This principle brought forth an attitude - very distant from the Lutheran "truncus et lapis"<sup>5</sup> - which we can find in the Chartist movement with its lay leaders, who had been educated in the Methodist class meetings and trained as lay preachers. The Methodist groups were the fields of practicing manners of social conduct, developing a sensitivity to the needs of others, and setting in motion effective measures of assistance. By incorporating socially uprooted people into new social relationships, these individuals could be enabled to shape their lives to new standards and thus prepare themselves for social activities. The Methodist classes had this twofold "telos": to help individuals gain a new identity and consciousness of worth, and to provide a starting point for social activity within and beyond the classes themselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joana d'arc Meireles, Hagar, Arbeitshilfe für den Frauen-dienst der EmK, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Although originally referred to justification, it actually led to a social and ethical quietism in countries where the Lutheran church was dominant. A similar effect was caused by Luther's formula "iustus et peccator": "...this led either to quietism or to swaying between ecstasy and fear", stated the Lutheran theologian A.Peters in his article on Heiligung (sanctification), Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon, vol. II, p.454.

<sup>6</sup> It might be interesting to investigate the interrelationship between the militant nationalist movements especially in Central and Eastern Europe and their countries' history of oppression by feudal and/or foreign powers, during which there was no opportunity to learn the use of political and economic influence for the benefit of all.

## 2 Opening spaces of expectation

Even perfect love, wherever it may abide in human beings, is not perfect. The "pure love of God and man... increases more and more"<sup>7</sup>, people must let themselves ever anew be filled with love. Realizing the fruits of the Spirit in one's own life is a faith-supporting experience, nourishing the hope for an ongoing work of the Spirit. Being no condition for salvation, they were the "natural" consequence of the new life with Christ. God, who initiated and opened the way of salvation, empowers the believers to go. God, by his creative love, inaugurates a new reality of life, the reality of a new life.

2.1 The experience of being born again, of feeling God's love shed in our hearts, creates an appetite for more, an attitude of expectation, which is essentially unsatisfiable by any historic achievement. It initiates the unending fight against the roots of sin in the centres of persons and in the soil of the societal life. The encounter with their fellow classmembers encouraged the Methodists to believe in a real progress of their discipleship. They became witnesses of the changing power of the gospel and of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the "backslides", which could not be denied, there was the experience that the use of the means of grace was not just a ritual, but a nourishing trust in God's promises. And this experience was personal and societal, and always both. The classes and societies were communities, which were apt to preserve the members from the overstrain of a solitary, legalistic

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<sup>7</sup> Sermon 85: "On Working Out Our Own Salvation", II.1 (Sermons ed. Outler, vol.III, p.204).

piety as well as a superficial Christianity with no ethical claims, the one being equally dubious as the other. Justification by grace had endowed them with a new status as God's beloved children; regeneration had made them realize the renewing power of the Holy Spirit; the experience of solidarity and love had filled them with strength and activity to change the lives and the living conditions of the poor and needy. When everything went well, the whole process was quite "natural" within the biography of Christians. Love was not added to faith, but - in all its manifestations - proved to be its social shape.

2.2 The community life of the Methodists, the use of the means of grace, the outreach to the needy - sources and manners of receiving and practicing God's love - did not preserve them from getting lost in the care for their own lives, welfare, and security. The "great expectations" were suffocated by closing horizons. It is true: those who joined Wesley had to dispense with certain methods of making money<sup>8</sup>, but on the whole, Methodists, following the protestant work ethic which hails diligence, "honest labour", and frugality, were "growing rich"; and they lost the existential context from which their compassion and love for the poor had risen, and often enough the help for the poor became a "work of mercy" again.

One of the big challenges of our middle class Methodist churches today is just the same: they have lost the living contact with the poor. They have to learn from the poor to realize, who has laid the

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<sup>8</sup> They "cannot follow their former way of life at all (as pawnbrokers, smugglers, buyers or sellers of uncustomed goods). Others cannot follow it as they did before. For they cannot oppress, cheat, or defraud their neighbour..." (J.Wesley, A Farther Appeal... Part I, VII.7 = Works, vol.11, ed.G.R.Cragg, p.193).

foundation of their life and their faith and whom they have to "trust in ... with all their heart" and "not to rely on their insight",<sup>9</sup> riches, and power. "Solidarity" too often has become a merely theoretical term.

### 3 "Structural sin" and "love in structures"

John Wesley analysed some economics interdependencies rather correctly - taken into account the tools he make use of - and he contradicted widely spread prejudices like the view that idleness is the chief cause of poverty<sup>10</sup>. His concept of stewardship implicates the social obligation of property, but the economic and political system as such was not questioned.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of stewardship can be unfolded in three principles:

(1) We are not the owners of what we own. (2) The creation is God's and given for all. (3) We are responsible for the use we make of the things which are entrusted to us.

Th.Jennings has shown how little were the consequences which Wesley drew from these principles, because he did not want "to break with the Church of England in any point of doctrine", in this case with Article 28 "Of Christian Men's Goods Which Are Not Common".<sup>12</sup> But does - as Jennings pretends - "the consistent application of Wesley's views of stewardship" lead "to an acceptance of pentecostal com-

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<sup>9</sup> Cp. Prov 3:5.

<sup>10</sup> Journal 8 Febr 1753 (Journal ed Ward/Heitzenrater, vol III, p.445).

<sup>11</sup> In my book on J.Wesley's Social Ethics, p. 43f, I mention some exceptions (connected with starvation and unemployment) which do not invalidate the observation.

<sup>12</sup> T.Jennings, Good News to the Poor, p.177.

mun(al)ism as the (!) model for the new society of scriptural holiness"? I do not question the possibility of drawing this consequence from Wesley's economic principles, but I doubt that it is the only possible one. The so-called "communism of love"<sup>13</sup>, as Acts 4:32-35 describe it, never existed. The picture of the primitive church painted by Luke is "with no doubt historically incorrect"<sup>14</sup>. By generalizing individual actions and perhaps drawing upon Jesus words about riches, Luke was idealizing the community of the first church. What did not function in the first Christian generation and in any following is not serviceable for an economic concept today. And the collapse of the socialist systems of our days - in spite of all differences in detail - does not strengthen the argument for any kind of communist concept. When social theory ("pure doctrine") and economic effectiveness are being looked at as alternatives instead of two poles, which produce a vivid tension, necessary for solving actual or immanent problems, there will be either an ideological superstruction, which paralyses human activities, or a "naked capitalism" with all the consequences to be seen since Wesley's days. Whatever Wesley's (secret) motives may have been - the present ethical reflection cannot skip the question how a consistent and functioning conception of evangelical ethics can be developed in order to change the reality of the economic conditions of the poor - and consequently of all!

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Sin is manifest and effective in social structures. In the process of social sanctification ("spreading holiness over the land"), the love

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<sup>13</sup> E. Troeltsch: "Liebeskommunismus".

<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Schrage, Ethik des Neuen Testaments, p.123. Compare Acts 5:4; 12:12 etc.

of our neighbours has to invade the economic and political structures of our societies and of the global community. This is more than Wesley realized and perhaps would have accepted ("no politics!").

What are the criteria? Compassion and the quest for justice must hinder all Methodists to join or to accept the orders and rules legitimizing the oppression of the poor (among others). In Ted Jennings' questions: "What is the consequence for the poor?" and "What is the consequence for human rights?"<sup>15</sup>

It is not the task of theologians to fill in these basic principles or to develop political and economic programmes, which convert theory into praxis. Nevertheless, they/we are not allowed to leave the stage after having performed our theological part. The two questions remain as constant tasks: to look for the context from which our theology can grow as a renewing and not only recapitulating theory, and to enter into a dialogue with those who are experts in these economic and political fields - either by education or by experience. The telos stands clear before our eyes, but how we can get there?

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<sup>15</sup> T. Jennings, l.c. page 221.