

The 13th Oxford Institute for Methodist Studies, Pembroke College, Oxford, August 12 – 19, 2018

Discovering Radical Methodism in Latin America

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I begin this article with a personal anecdote which will help to understand the search for this work. At the beginning of 2001 I was at Drew University preparing my master's thesis. I was researching over different aspects of Wesleyan theology, for which I consulted a great number of books. Since it was an issue that I thought to continue investigating when I returned to Buenos Aires, I made an online consultation to the library catalog of ISEDET, the ecumenical seminary, constituted by seven churches and where has been theologically trained many generations of pastors over the years. The query was general, by keywords: Wesley - theology. The result of the search stunned me. Surely something has failed, I thought. I went back to the search. The same answer: the last book on Wesleyan Theology that had been registered at ISEDET library was from 1969! Coincidentally the year when the seminary stopped being Methodist to become ecumenical. Why do we allow several generations of Methodist pastors being theologically educated without Wesley thought? How did we get there? Through the next lines we shall try to get some answers.

Methodism came to Latin America in 1836, (South Cone mostly) but it was not until 1980's decade that some serious approaches on Wesleyan thought were made. Why Methodist theology was absent during such a time? Why Latin American Methodists could not take advantage of Wesleyan thought to accomplish fruitful contributions to 70's Liberation Theology?

The first part of this paper intent to track down the reasons of this absence. One reason is rooted in the North American religious atmosphere in times of Methodist missions, when Methodism at the same time was disputing with other great denominations to

gain a “respectful” theological place in their religious scene. That situation led main stream Methodism to quit to some aspects of Wesleyan theology in order to appear as a more decent and orthodox protestant denomination.

The other trace is found in the South American religious atmosphere when all evangelical¹ denomination decided to merge as a one solid defensive body to battle against the powerful Catholic Church. Wesleyan theology was pruned again in order to fit, so the irritants and annoying aspects of Wesleyan thought were polished in a *melted evangelical style*.

The second part of the paper is focused in the road towards the discovery of the whole raw roots of radical Wesleyan thought, without prunes, nor polished edges. In this part there is a brief analysis of five aspects of Methodist theology which can be of relevance for today’s Latin American Methodist thought.

A blurry and distorted heritage

There are some studies on the inheritances and the conditioning mediations with which Methodism reached Latin America after passing through the United States. Mortimer Arias offers a clarifier article " *As mediacoes distorsionantes na transmisao do legado original do Wesley*"². Also the article by Julio Santa Ana *Heranca e Responsabilidade do Metodismo na America Latina (Reflexoes sobre a tradicao metodista e a responsabilidade de torná-la- atual numa perspectiva latino-americana*³. These articles, as well as that of Nora Boots, “*The ideological character of Methodism that came from the USA*”⁴ works on the most visible manifestations of the ideological conditioning.

Methodism reached to Latin America through two missionary streams, in two different historical moments, with different theological backgrounds, with political implications in many cases opposed. The missionary stream of the North that arrived in the Southern Cone of Latin America in 1836 brought the postulates of the progressive, enlightenment and respectable Protestantism of the great cities of the USA.

¹ Notice that the word “evangelical” is not the opposite to “protestant” as it is used in the United States. In Latin America both are words which usually can be used as synonymous.

² “*As mediacoes distorsionantes na transmisao do legado original do Wesley*” Luta Pela Vida, (São Paulo, Ediciones Paulinas- UNIMEP, 1985) 73ss

³ Ibid 47s

⁴ Ibid.114ss

For its part, Southern Methodism planned its missions in full expansionist and imperialist stage of the USA (1895), after the slow assimilation of the defeat of the civil war, which brought a heavy burden of subjectivism and escapist spiritualism to mission. During the twentieth century both expressions of methodism developed their own theological paradigms and distortion of a radical Wesleyan thought.

The “ugly duck complex” of northern methodism

It is very known the Nathan Bangs early efforts⁵, for preventing the transformation of Methodism into a branch of the "progressive" New School of Calvinism. That was the desire of a new respectable Methodism that wanted to erase the non-domesticable and grassroots intransigent theological edges of Wesleyan – Arminian Methodism.⁶

In fact, the ideas of being the chosen people, of being the owners of a *manifest destiny*, and the ascending social mobility, were slowly modeling the ideology and theology of the main Protestant expressions. Protestantism were becoming into a respectable and well-off religion, also Methodism. In fact, several of the schisms suffered by the official Methodism during that century had to do with a claim to return to the sources.

In the same way during the first part of the twentieth century the tendency expressed by authors as George Cell, Collin William and others, to legitimize, making up and updating Wesley in order to be accepted by the world theological academy, has been openly obvious.

Methodism needed to fit in the “big leagues” of theology. It was necessary for methodism being close to the large denominations which came from protestant orthodoxy.

It is remarkable the deep interest showed by studies of that time in the searching for the points in common between Wesley and the Reformers and thus, in such a way, transforming Wesley into a perfect Protestant. Therefore, it was urgent to show that the roots of Wesleyan thought were in line with that of both Luther⁷ and Calvin⁸.. Although,

⁵ Ver Robert Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism, 1790-1935*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 45ss

⁶ Considerar por ejemplo la enorme tarea de Nathan Bangs en *The Errors of Hopkinsianism Detected and Exposed*, donde defiende el arminianismo metodista contra el intento de calvinización de sus posturas, citado por Robert Chiles, 44

⁷ Ver por ejemplo Franz Hildebrandt, *From Luther to Wesley*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951), Collin William, *John Wesley for Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960)

⁸ George C. Cell, *The rediscovering of John Wesley*, (New York: Ed. Henry Holt and Co. 1935)

as we know, the theological contacts between Wesley and the Reformers` writings showed clearly less agreements than differences, which, by the way, it have been neatly hidden!

The subjectivism of the southern methodism

From the other end of the theological spectrum a process of homogenization is also taking place but in this case with the evangelicalism of the "Bible Belt" and in particular with the holiness movement post Civil War. It is interesting the phenomenon described by W.W. Sweet in his study of revivals in the United States⁹,, and how the phenomenon of "awakenings" functioned as an evangelical "mixer of traditions" diluting the theological particularities, especially those traditions which, as methodism, has a delicate theological structure of a very unstable equilibrium that claimed a careful balance so as not to blur its identity.

It is well known that Methodism adhered in general terms to the emphases promoted by the so-called second revival. Certainly by 1840, the second revival, had a strong content of social reform. Here it is necessary to highlight, as well as Donald Dayton does in the clarifying study on antebellum evangelicalism in his book *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage*¹⁰. Dayton says that the Civil War of 1860 marks a break in the evangelical paradigms. After the great southern disappointment, evangelicalism sought for the answers to their defeat in the intimacy of the individual heart.

So, the search for holiness and social reform which had characterized the sanctity movement in the antebellum period was replaced by the search for individual holiness. Thus, individualist religion takes shape, the personal conversion would be the only unifying axis of the Christian task. The premillennial eschatology of the "rapture" and escape from the world and the dispensationalism is consolidated at the same time. The religious subjectivism, the theology of feeling and intuition had been consolidated.

Latin America and its own problems with the radical methodism

Both Methodisms with their own distortions reached Latin America where the phenomenon was further deepened. The fight against Catholicism was one of the main

⁹ William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America, Its Origin, Growth and Decline*, (Ney York: Scribner ans Son, 1945)

¹⁰ Donald Dayton, "*Discovering An Evangelical Heritage*"(Hendrickson Publishers, 1976) 121ss

catalysts of this process of homogenization of Methodism with the so-called "evangelical world". It was of urgent need for protestants to oppose Catholicism through alterity. This phenomenon happened among all the evangelical expressions present in the region regardless of their missionary extraction and theological tendency. This approach as a defensive strategic alliance among the evangelical denominations in Latin America was pushing Methodism to a process of self-mutilation of the essential aspects of its theological identity, in order to fit in, again.

The priority of protestants, in that context, was not to clash for traditions, not even to show contradictions that could divert attention from its main objective: to fight the terrain to Catholicism. Therefore, all those discussions that had raised arguments among the evangelical expressions in the US, now had to be cut off to facilitate coexistence and a common strategy. This was the atmosphere when the Panama Congress in 1916 outlined a common strategy for all the evangelical forces in the continent.

Thus, in this context, the theological aspects that methodism should show out were those that would not produce dissensions towards the interior of the evangelical block. Thus, the only "registered trademark" of Methodism was the exclusive centrality of the story of the ardent heart, as a safe passport to get into the evangelical world.

In 1939, both Methodist sectors in the United States were unified and the Methodist Church is born out from the merge of the Methodist churches, Episcopal North and South and the Protestant Methodist. As an enthusiastic response to this new stage, returned the desire to know the sources. Thus, from 1940 on, a soft return to the recognition of the Wesleyan heritage begins. However, the moralistic liberalism of those times did not allow us to rescue more than a superficial caricature of Wesley. This kind of moralist methodism appears in particular in the southern cone of South America and Mexico, helped by the profuse publication made by the two larger Publishing Houses, La Aurora in Buenos Aires and the Casa Unida de Publicaciones in México. Some of these books were close to be apologies and Methodist hagiographies. Most English translations: Such as *John Wesley thought* of Reginald Kissak; *Juan Wesley, Revolucionario del Espíritu* of Basil Mathews; *Línea de Esplendor sin fin*, by Halford Luccok; *Los Metodistas* of Alfred Faulker and some few local productions, like that of Sante Uberto Barbieri's *Una extraña estirpe de audaces*; Gonzalo Baez Camargo's *Genio y Espíritu del Metodismo Wesleyano*; Urcola-Bauman's *Los Wesley*, and Mortimer Arias' *Los metodistas somos así*.

All of them were very good works of divulgation, dedicated to disseminating the Wesleyan biography and describing the characteristics of what or how a Methodist should be, but strictly speaking none of them were an attempt to deepen theological understanding of Wesleyan thought. An exception to this rule were two articles by José Miguez Bonino in *Theological Notebooks* of 1950¹¹ comparing Wesley's theology with that of Reformation theology, particularly Calvinist theology and a book by Foster Stockwell, *La teología de Juan Wesley y la nuestra*.¹²

Saving these exceptions, in general, the epoch tends to rescue Wesley as "exemplary person", but apart from this there was not much else to say in the churches about the Wesleyan tradition. This was limited just to the statement of some famous phrases of the founder of Methodism. The Aldersgate factor actually became the only reference, whose "burning heart" was used almost exclusively by the most conservative groups to reproach coldness to those who understood mission in a wide conception of social and secularized actions, and not only as evangelization and the preaching of personal conversion.

Could it be this diffuse and biased beginning of Wesleyan thought the reason for its absence during the years in which Liberation Theology was being developed in Latin America? In fact Wesleyan thought was absent from the theological and social-contextual reflection in those times.

Except for the edition of a very clipped selection of some of his sermons, Wesley's Works were unknown in Spanish, until well into the 1990s when the volumes of the *Wesley Works* in Spanish, sponsored by the Wesley Heritage Foundation, and directed by Justo González, came to light.

Can this long absence show a frank disinterest of the Methodist leaders for a direct approach to Wesleyan thought?

Whatever the motivation, the final result was the condemnation of several generations of Methodists to know Wesley's thought constrained only through the accessible materials with the limitations already stated. In this way, very badly known -only by fragments and well-intentioned caricatures by the way- the figure of Wesley was

¹¹ José Miguez Bonino, *Juan Wesley y la Teología de la Reforma*, (Cuadernos Teológicos V.1, N°3, 1950) p. 61-70 y *Juan Wesley y Calvino*, (Cuadernos Teológicos V.1, N° 4, 1950) p.47-53

¹² B. Foster Stockwell, *La Teología de Juan Wesley y la Nuestra*, Buenos Aires, La Aurora, 1962.

projected as an anachronistic memory of a past that did not have much to do with the Latin American reality.

Wesley and Latin America were separated by a historical, cultural and ideological distance insurmountable for many. Thus, the Methodists found very difficult to find something valuable in Wesleyan theology to integrate it into the theological reflection of liberation that was given in those years.

It is also true that the distances and contradictions present in Wesley: his monarchical ideology, his antidemocratic thinking, personal management of power, were not precisely an incentive when seeking paradigms of liberation.

At last, the whole Wesley is being exhumed

Latin American Methodism knew and had been practicing ecclesiological models, ecumenical policies, pastoral options, commitment with the poor. All these were Wesleyan practices that had been exercised long ago by Methodism. What were actually missing were the theological foundations that allowed those practices. That was the reason why the task of recovering those very valuable but absent and blurred theological aspects in the Wesleyan doctrine needed to be done in order to rethinking the construction of an autochthonous Methodism.

At the 7th meeting Oxford Institute of Wesleyan Studies in 1982, a quite representative group of participants from Latin America attended for the first time to the congress. That would be the starting point for a new time for Wesleyan thought in Latin America. A similar meeting would be developed for the first time in Latin America in February of 1983 in San José, Costa Rica. Another similar one took place in Piracicaba, Brazil in 1984. These meetings should be the beginning of a Latin American movement of Methodist theological reflection. Twenty years had to pass before a new Latin American meeting of Wesleyan Studies were held in 2004 in San Pablo, and the fourth meeting took place in Buenos Aires in 2012.

From this moment on, new approaches and creative looks were emerging from LA on Wesleyan thought and its relevance to our context. Thus, from the 1980s and thanks to the Oxford Institute meetings (specially the Pre-Institute meetings which gathered participants from the Third World) and the Latin American Meetings of Wesleyan Studies, new aspects of Wesleyan theology were exhumed which come to help to think

a theology from Latin America. Those aspects that had been softened, now appear in all their radicality.

Reencountering these edges and interpreting them in the light of Latin American reality should be the task that could shed some light on delayed aspects of our theology. This is still a pending task, here we will only point out briefly some relevant items:

1-Environmental ethics and care of creation

The Brazilian theologians from Sao Paulo School of Theology had reconsidered the Wesleyan quadrilateral by adding a fifth point to the structure. With Bible at the center four points surrounded: Reason, Tradition, Experience **and Creation**.

No doubt some new hermeneutic keys opens up when we look at Wesley's vision of creation. In Wesley's work the love for God and neighbor **extends to all creation**. Here Wesley's emphasis on the image of God comes into new focus. As Howard Snyder notes: "Many Christians restrict the *imago dei* to humans only. Wesley was clear as to human uniqueness, but he did not make the radical break between humanity and the rest of creation that characterizes most Christian theology. This is theologically significant. God's image may be restored in all creation, not just in humans—as Wesley speculates in "The Great Deliverance." " ¹³

Latin America is a large reservoir of natural resources: water, oil, food, minerals an abundant and varied fauna. These natural riches have become into an object of a greedy and insatiable interest of corporations for their exploitation without limit.

The holistic perspective of Wesleyan thought and his call to be "good stewards" raises the possibility of thinking clues for an ethics of the environment and also laying the foundations for a Wesleyan eco-theology from AL.

2-Working for our salvation

Another blurred aspects of Wesleyan theology has been the Wesleyan concept of double justification. This is the work of God's redemption through Jesus Christ going through two moments: justification-sanctification. It is the Wesleyan affirmation that justification by faith must necessarily be followed by sanctification by works of love.

This doctrine comes with it its immediate consequence: the annoying assertion for an orthodox protestant, that in Wesleyan soteriology the Works, as fruits of faith are not only desirable, **but necessary for salvation**.

¹³ <http://www.catalystresources.org/wesley-the-environmentalist/>

Recovering the concept of double justification is not a mere abstract and speculative discourse. It is in the first place, to recover the place that prevenient grace possesses as a starting point of theology and at the same time as an enabler of human freedom to decide. A grace that allows to discover an anthropology liberated from the weight and the pessimistic vision in which almost the entire Protestant spectrum placed it.

Justification and sanctification, as a salvific whole. This is a formulation that remains as a masterpiece of theological architecture. Model that paraphrasing Wesley, is very Catholic for a Protestant and very Protestant for a Catholic.

This balance in the formulation helps to avoid the polarization of the two extremes of the soteriological discussion. Wesley will assert: both are necessary for salvation: faith and also works, without any of them salvation would be lost.

With this we are saying something that would not go unnoticed by a Calvinist or Lutheran: **works are necessary for salvation**. This concept is what allows Wesley to affirm that Christianity is a practical religion, it is "faith in works".

This affirmation is very valuable for a Latin American theology that is created and recreated in contexts of grave injustices and inequities. As Argentine theologian José Míguez Bonino would say, "*Faith in the search for efficacy*"¹⁴. In Latin America a theology only speculative ends up being an accomplice with power. The love of God is reaffirmed when it is translated into concrete works of love and transformation of oppressive realities. This also opens the door for the next item.

3-The Christian Experience: God working in history

Liberation Theology developed a basic concept for its epistemology: Praxis, that is, the dialectical relationship between Practice and Theory, where practice comes first and theory later. Wesley's concept of "experience" runs a very similar common way.

Much has been said about the subjective, individual internal experience that, of course, they are present in Wesley's experience. It is not necessary here to remember the story of the night of Aldersgate. However, the "external" experiences are those that allow Wesley to **link faith with history**.

Thus, the experience for Wesley is the historical and palpable experience, what God does to change the human being, from within but also from the outside. As Garrastegui

¹⁴ Míguez Bonino, *La Fe en busca de eficacia*, ED. Ágora, Sígueme, Salamanca, 1977. This is the Spanish edition of *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Fort Press, 1975

and Jones¹⁵ analyze, the ways in which Wesley refers to experience are varied and denote this double presence.

While the subjective experience is usually called "*feeling*", or also "bodily emotions" (basically referred to community experiences in worship meetings for which he was accused of being an enthusiast). It is the external experience that Wesley calls "*providence*" which has a particular dynamic.

It is the historical anchor of the faith. The *experience* in Wesleyan theology is the factor that allows us to think about the Wesleyan system as an empirical theology, called Practical or experimental, what Runyon also calls Wesleyan Orthopraxis.

That is, it does not search for a "Right Doctrine", but for a "Right Practice". Thus, as in Liberation Theology, for Wesley the practice comes before the doctrine.

"I believe that our merciful God takes into account people's life and the way of being more than their ideas. I believe that He respects more a good heart than a lucid mind; and that if the heart of a person (with the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit) is full of that humble, patient and affable love that unites God and human beings, God will not cast him into eternal punishment just for not have their ideas clear, or have their concepts confused"¹⁶

Experience goes before reason, practice before doctrine. This does not mean a disregard for intellectual activity, nor a pragmatism without theory. What it means is that the starting point of theology must necessarily be the experience in the historical context. It is only from that practice that the theory, or the doctrine, could be elaborated as a Word incarnate. This is fundamental to avoid speculative theologies, without any contact with historical reality. Wesley knew very well this point, for that reason his whole thought was constructed as responses to real and historical problems.

4-Resistance to sin

Another aspect of radical Wesleyan thought is the concept of resistance to sin which also has been very well hidden in the evangelical world by the Methodists themselves. We cannot forget that Wesley in many aspects and especially in his doctrine of sin is semi-Pelagian, and that also in his concept of perfection underlay implicit the idea that sin can be resisted.

Wesley, following very closely the oriental fathers has a *therapeutic* idea of sin. He conceives sin not as a *guilt* as Latin *forensic* vision does, but as *corruption*. The sin makes human beings sick and disfigures in them the image of God.

¹⁵ Celsa Garrastegui y William Jones, Guías de Estudio para las Obras de Wesley, (Wesley Heritage Foundation, 2002) p 37ss

¹⁶ Obras de Wesley, (IV, 332)

The Grace of God is the one that heals the disease and allows the human being to be enabled again to exercise his freedom, without the burden of guilt.

Wesley does not deny original sin as Pelagius does, but he affirms that it is erased from the human being by Jesus Christ through the grace of God. Thus, free from original and ontological guilt, the sin in the stage of sanctification is conceived as the emergence of actions in contrary to the will of God that again disfigure the image of God in the human being. Through grace, those sinful actions can be avoided, that is what Wesley calls the resistance to sin.

From that same reasoning Wesley affirms (together with Arminio) that just as the human being can resist sin, he can also resist and reject the grace of God (crucial confrontation point with Calvinism).

For Wesley both are dialectical relations by opposition: those who accepts the grace of God will be able to resist sin, on the contrary whoever resists the grace of God, will not be able to resist sin. It is true that this has been one of the aspects more reluctant and more hidden of the Wesleyan thought. For many Methodists with a Calvinist theological substrate have always considered revulsive, but without a doubt is one of the central claims of Wesleyan theology.

The concept of "resistance" to sin is dynamic and it questions the mere blameworthy resignation marked by a simple formal confession. Resistance implies recognition, repentance and a human effort to avoid it. We should think about the theoretical and practical consequences that this idea of resistance to sin would achieve in Latin America, where sin is incarnate in political, economics, judicial structures which generates injustice, inequity and death. Such a challenge for methodists!

5-The Christian Perfection

The idea of "resistance to sin" along with its closest immediate consequence: the Christian perfection, were erased from the Methodist ideology. The first, by the mere fact of ignoring it, the second by changing its meaning. Thus, the idea of Christian perfection was diverted towards two deformations:

On the one hand the vision of the Catholic Church and different evangelical more rationalist streams (among which was located the official Methodism), understood that the fully finished perfection of a Christian is only possible in the hereafter. On the other hand the vision of the churches linked to the sanctity movements began to speak of the second sanctification or instantaneous perfection or the baptism of holy spirit.

Following again the oriental fathers, Wesley's idea of perfection finds a third way and it is based more on the Greek word *teleios*, than on the Latin word *perfectus*. The second one has a more static character of something finished. The word *teleios* instead has, at least in the use of the Greek fathers, a nuance towards the idea of process. Neither of the two words imply the idea of "without failure" or "good", but rather the concept of "reaching the corresponding height", "finding the optimal format". Thus, Christian perfection is for Wesley, a process which is guided by the quest to complete in a future the characteristics of a full Christian (not a half one, as Wesley referred).

In Latin America thousands of Christians left their lives fighting for a better world. In these contexts, the call to be a full Christian carries risks of life, to seek perfection in these cases is bearing the burdens and continue on the path of committed testimony even in the middle of the risks. The Christian perfection, in these cases, is at the level of the utopia which help to continue in the search, as it is said poetically by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano:

She is on the horizon.
I approach two steps and she takes two steps away.
I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further.
No matter how much I walk, I will never reach her.
What is utopia for? For that purpose, to walk.¹⁷

Conclusion

We have tried to analyze very succinctly in this article the reasons why Wesleyan thought arrived incomplete to Latin America. Some missing aspects, others deformed, others hidden. We have seen that the factors that led to this situation have been varied. Some have been the product of the theological struggles that took place in the nineteenth century in the USA and those, through the missionaries, arrived to these lands.

Also we pointed the reality of the Methodist churches in Latin America that had neither the incentive, nor the desire nor the possibilities of accessing to a complete vision of Wesley's thought.

¹⁷ Eduardo Galeano, Ventana sobre la utopía.

A misunderstood ecumenism also led to the erroneous thinking that by deepening into particular traditions, ecumenical relationships would be threatened.

It was assumed that the Protestant theology by default was that of the central European national churches. This, came to be understood as an ecumenical theology, when in fact, it held emphasis and approaches very distant from those of Methodism. But the view at that time was not critical.

The myth was assumed that Methodism has not developed a serious theology, that Wesley was a great preacher and evangelizer but not a theologian.

We have not stopped on the pastoral aspect of Wesley and his work with the poor and marginalized, because actually that aspect was -and it is- always present in the Methodist ideology of Latin America. We wanted instead, to take a look to the other, deeper levels of construction of his thought.

That is why we analyze the long road to recovery of all aspects of Wesleyan thought and in particular those that were not very proper to be shown to the general Protestant community.

Today we can study these aspects and take them as an invitation to reflect on them and their relevance to the theological practice of the popular field in Latin America. We have rescued five aspects that allow us to continue problematizing the practice and theological reflection. There is nothing hidden anymore, we just need to be able to take advantage of the enormous potential of this thought.

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