

The thirteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies
Wesleyan Communities and the World beyond Christianity

“I have no authority from the Word of God ‘to judge those that are without’”¹:
Religious plurality in Wesleyan perspective

Draft to be improved

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The present time is deeply marked by widespread awareness of cultural and religious diversity, perhaps like no other era was in the past. Not only in cosmopolitan metropolises as London, Paris, and New York, or Mexico City, Buenos Aires and São Paulo, but also in small towns and villages is not hard to see different religious manifestations. Population displacements, intensification of world trade, communications facility and all the factors involved in the so-called phenomenon of globalization broke the last barriers that kept cultural spaces in splendid isolation. There is no unbridgeable distance separating particular group from another. There are strong reasons to suppose that nothing should change this process, which will certainly be intensified over the coming decades.

However this fact causes different reactions, often, antagonistic. If, on the one hand, the feeling of tolerance, respect and acceptance in the face of inevitable differences expands, old rivalries, by the other hand, reborn and extreme forms of bigotry, discrimination and violence are developed intensively. Not all people regard multi-cultural and multi-religious society as "a tremendous opportunity".² There are many voices that express complete dissatisfaction with neighbors following religious traditions whose values they do not recognize. Repeatedly the other is seen as a threat and even demonized. Thus, instead of enriching interchange, hatred prevails usually fueled by ignorance.

It is necessary to admit that the Christian churches, including Methodists, have great responsibility in spreading prejudices against other religions. In Brazil, for instance, the meaning of ancestral religions or cult of *orixás* for survival of Africans forcibly brought as slaves by the Portuguese merchants never was fully understood. Even today devotions of African origin are harassed by many churches as crude superstitions that have nothing to say concerning to the relationship with the sacred or the community life. Likewise, by analyzing the missionary movement, Theodore Jennings points out the unfortunate association between religious arrogance of Christians, alleged cultural superiority and economic power.

¹ 1 Cor. 5:12, quoted by John Wesley in *Sermon 130, § 14*.

² The expression is from HARRIS, Elizabeth. “Wesleyan Witness in an Interreligious Context”. In: MEADOWS, Philip R. *Wesleyan Theology in Today’s World*. Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997, p. 70.

For much of the time after Wesley the Methodist movement has joined the rest of Christianity in supposing that other religious traditions have to be confronted only with the challenge to repent and believe the gospel. But we have become increasingly aware that this approach has too often also been associated with the imperialistic tendencies of Western Euro-American society. Thus instead of sharing the gospel we have often confused it with values that further the interests of empire, of capital, of cultural hegemony.³

Indeed, both the Catholic and the Protestant missions – despite distinctive theological emphases – have played similar roles in relation to autochthonous cultures. The gospel was presented as a finished product that should be accepted or rejected with inevitable consequences for the eternal salvation or damnation. The break with the local culture and unconditional adherence to the new paradigms were basic requirements for the believers. There was no stimulus to reinterpret the Christian faith in dialogue with the traditions that existed before the Christian preaching. All initiatives in this direction were summarily convicted. Protestant presence in Latin America in the 19th century developed, moreover, a strong anti-Catholic sentiment. Religion as experienced in this region was described as semi-pagan and semi-Christian, therefore subject to corrections that only Protestant missionaries and their followers could offer.

It is interesting how the theologians invoke habitually the sources of the past – whether elements of the biblical message or of confessional heritage – in order to legitimize prejudices and close themselves and their communities to the necessary dialogue. It is assumed that historical interpretation supports the status quo while ignoring the impact of hermeneutic mediations. Unfortunately, Methodist Church in Brazil chose the last path when, in its General Conference in 2006, decided to withdraw from the ecumenical agencies of which the Catholic Church and other religions were members. This decision immediately led shutdown of the Methodist Church from two bodies: the National Council of Christian Churches [CONIC] and from an ecumenical services agency [CESE]. For many, this was a necessary measure to "purify" the Methodist church of undesirable influences and the first step toward total break with any ecumenical organizations. For others, however, resolutions of this nature not only result in

³ JENNINGS JR., Theodore W. *Wesley e o Mundo Atual*. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, p. 76, here quoted from the original text of the author. Elizabeth HARRIS reaches similar conclusions by reviewing the Methodist presence in Asia: "The encounter between the early Wesleyan Methodists and the religions of Asia was moulded not only by the evangelical convictions they brought but also by socio-economic factors and power relations. [...] This plus imperial power led to an arrogance which could sweep the religion and culture of Asia under the carpet as uncivilised" [1997, p. 70]. It should be noted that these statements are based on the analysis of the discourses that justify missionary efforts, in particular, of the early Methodists directly engaged in these actions: Thomas Coke and Benjamin Clough (p. 62-64); William Harvard (p. 64-66); and Robert Spence Hardy (p. 66-68).

abandonment of historical emphases of Methodism and ecclesiological distortions, but especially in decay of the missionary witness of the Methodist Church in Brazilian society.

Debate around the subject promises to be extended throughout time. So opportunities will not be lacking to explore the issues involved. Therefore, because of the theme chosen for the Thirteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies – *Wesleyan Communities and the World beyond Christianity* – and according to the circumstances described above, the main objective of this paper is to verify if there are elements in Wesleyan theology which can found respect and tolerance, acquaintanceship and dialogue, between different faith traditions. Not only John Wesley's works as primary source but also the literature on this subject, as far as possible, will be researched.⁴

Wesley and faith traditions beyond of Christianity

Someone could claim that this issue was not on the theological agenda of the 18th century. How to respond to this allegation? First of all, it must be acknowledged that the main concern of Wesley was spread scriptural holiness among his countrymen in a context marked by nominal Christianity. In a time when the official Church had forgotten the poor people and religious practice was restricted to mere formalities, to proclaim the grace that transforms hearts and lives as well as churches and society was simply urgent in Great Britain. Perhaps for this reason when Thomas Coke insisted on sending missionaries to the East Indies, Wesley felt no enthusiasm. Anyway, the Methodist preachers discussed the proposal but refused it, as Wesley indicates in his *Journal* as follows: "After the matter had been fully considered, we were unanimous in our judgment that we have no call thither yet, no invitation, no providential opening of any kind".⁵ There was plenty to do at home and, on that occasion, to devote to overseas missions would divert efforts that should be at the nearest and crucial task.

Nevertheless, Wesley did not lose interest of the mission beyond the Christian boundaries, particularly in areas where the gospel seed was unknown. Neither ignored the great religious diversity in the world, though he had in general replicated just stereotypical and discriminatory

⁴ Several articles and books on this subject have already been published so that there is a great debt of this research with many authors. Their names and references are listed in the Bibliography. Nevertheless it is worth highlighting the following writers: S. Wesley Ariarajah (1985), Inderjit S. Bhogal (2007), John B. Cobb (1995), J. Robert Ewbank (2009), Elizabeth Harris (1997), Theodore W. Jennings Jr. (2007), Walter Klaiber & Manfred Marquard (1993), Randy L. Maddox (1992), David A. Pailin (1984), Lynne Price (1991) and Theodore Runyon (1998).

⁵ February 14, 1784. Editors of Volume XXIII [The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley], Journal and Diaries VI (1776-1786), add the following note to this registry: "Conference had similarly declined to send missionaries to Africa in 1778".

vision of his days. All this is well exemplified in the Sermon 63, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, published in 1783.

Really the theme of religious plurality was not utterly strange in 17th and 18th centuries in England, due to the expansion of British domination in the world.⁶ Reports of travelers and missionaries, as well as reflections of thinkers, philosophers and theologians around religion attracted the attention of literate population, composing, however, a heterogeneous series with exotic, inaccurate and, in most cases, unreliable information. Apologetic interests prevailed and molded figures and arguments according to the intended purpose. Many scholars sought to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith while others had as goal to exalt the natural religion or simply disqualify religious practice. Wesley followed closely these debates, but his knowledge was not only literary. In the English colonies, he came into direct contact with people from different religious experiences, not only Christians, like the German Moravians, but also Spanish Jews and Native Americans.

However, to know face to face was not enough to rid him of hasty and unfair judgments, as it will be demonstrated below. Before it should be noted that today's religious plurality has contours that Wesley could not even imagine in his time. The urgency of dialogue between different faith traditions was dramatically emphasized in the statement of Hans Küng: "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions".⁷ The extent of the problems that afflict humankind and endanger all life forms on the planet is immeasurable to be ignored by the religions or addressed in isolation, without ties of cooperation and solidarity. Ensuring environmental sustainability; eradication of poverty and hunger; overcoming social injustice and inequality; promoting gender equality; inclusion of children and elderly people; socialization of education and health services; ending of financial speculation, of the drug traffic, of the human trade and of wars, are goals that must mobilize and assemble all men and women of good will, even more those who are religious.

Faced with this situation, it seems pointless to ask whether and how the Wesleyan theology can help the churches of the 21st century to respond to current challenges of inter-religious dialogue. In this case, it is appropriate to apply the test suggested by Runyon to Wesley himself:

⁶ An excellent source to deepen this field of study is the work of Pailin that also gathers a collection of extracts from texts of the 17th and 18th centuries in relation to other religions now no longer accessible. Cf. PAILIN, David A. *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Britain*, 1984.

⁷ KÜNG, Hans. *Global Responsibility: In search of a new world ethic*. New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., p. xv.

“One mark of creativity in a theologian’s approach is if his or her perspective can be applied to issues not current when the theology was originally developed”.⁸ To relate Wesley and religious pluralism is especially necessary in the context of Methodism in Brazil because the Wesleyan heritage is constantly invoked to support sectarian positions. Therefore, it is imperative to start with ambiguities of Wesley’s thought on the topic of this research.

Ambiguities of Wesley’s attitude toward other religions

Wesley lived almost all the 18th century and left vast number of works written in different circumstances for respond to immediate challenges. Although, in general, he sought a synthesis of diverse points of view, countless times, he emphasized more one aspect than another. Like every human being, he also changed his mind and organized reasoning in order to strengthen his arguments as the case required. Thus, it is not hard to find, in his writings, opinions, not only divergent, but even totally opposite, on relevant matters today as much as yesterday, as it is the question of religion. The oscillation between extreme positions led Palin to consider the “inconsistency Wesley” as evident.⁹ Indeed, in most cases, the founder of Methodism only reflects distortions of interpretation and prejudices common in the 18th century. But suddenly, he surprises current readers with bold claims for his time and critical reflections on the alleged moral and cultural superiority of English Christians. Without ignoring these tensions, it is necessary to dating his comments, situating them in the context of his times as well as of his personal trajectory, and never losing sight of the whole. Insofar as possible, the researcher should to distinguish between what expresses the common sense of English society in the 18th century and what is peculiar trait of the contribution of Wesley. To avoid reductionist interpretations, Wesley ought to be showed with “warts and all”¹⁰, particularly in relationship with other religions, and not selectively mentioning only a few texts, while others are silenced, in order to confirm the view advocated.

Wesley follows the threefold pattern of classification, then in effect, which distinguished, beyond Christianity, three major religious groups, namely, heathenism, Jewish dispensation and “Mahometanism” accordingly his own terminology.¹¹ The first category is quite inclusive,

⁸ RUNYON, Theodore. *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 168.

⁹ PAILIN, 1984, p. 294, note 42.

¹⁰ Cf. BUTLER, David. *Methodists and Papists: John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995, p. xiii.

¹¹ Cf. Sermon 106; Pailin, p. 45-6; and Maddox, p. x.

embracing all who are out of divine revelation granted to Israel and through Christ, from the Greco-Roman philosophies and religions, which coexisted with the early Christians, to religions of America, Africa and Asia, to where British hegemony extended. Eventually the Muslims were also included in this segment.

The term “heathen” or “pagan” has strong pejorative connotation. Pagans were the inhabitants of remote rural areas of the Roman Empire – the *pagi* (*pagus*, singular) – that most intensely resisted the expansion of the Christian faith. Therefore it was not long before they were identified as “non-Christian” and then, as unbelievers, ignorant, barbaric, uncivilized, wild, etc. Wesley undoubtedly inherited this sharp negative charge, as indicated by Ewbank: “The terms ‘Heathen’, ‘atheism’, ‘infidel’, ‘dissipation’ and sometimes ‘Indian’, are not normally distinguished by Wesley”.¹² If, as the apologists in the Ancient Church, Wesley recognizes values and virtues in classical philosophy, albeit merged into error, soon hastens to emphasize the limitations of paganism and the superiority of Christianity. The “Pagan” belief in the natural goodness and consequent ignorance of total depravity of human beings, as well as unawareness of the atoning work of Christ and renewing action of the Holy Spirit, appear as the main points of the border that separates both religious systems¹³.

The attention of Wesley, however, focuses on the native religions. His assessment, at this point, supported by the European mentality, becomes extremely rude. In the sermon on “The General Spread of the Gospel”, based on research Brerewood about the diversity of languages and religions in the world, Wesley estimates that, of the thirty parts into which the world supposedly was divided, nineteen were Pagan, six Muslim and only five nominally Christian (§ 1). Updating the calculation made, he mentions newly discovered lands, particularly the islands in the South Seas, densely populated...

... By heathens of the basest sort, many of them inferior to the beasts of the field. Whether they eat men or no (which indeed I cannot find any sufficient ground to believe) they certainly kill all that fall into their hands. They are therefore more savage than lions, who kill no more creatures than are necessary to satisfy their present hunger. See the real dignity of human nature! Here it appears in its genuine purity... [Sermon 63, 1783, § 2].

The irony of the last phrases reveals the polemical tone of Wesley against those who exalted human dignity as free from harmful influence of society, politics and established

¹² EWBANK, J. Robert. *John Wesley, Natural Man, and the 'Isms'*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2009, p. 17.

¹³ Cf. Sermon 44, § III, 1-2 (1759); Sermon 85, § 1-2 (1785).

religion. His aim was above all the deistic thinkers who upheld the sufficiency of natural religion, without the assistance of divine revelation (cf. also *Journal*, July 9, 1737). Interestingly, before going to Georgia, Wesley came to cultivate an idealized vision of American Indians, very close to the romantic notion of Rousseau's "noble savage". He believed that away from the deformities of "civilization", the natives would receive with simplicity, the gospel message. In return, due to their modest style of living, he hoped to learn from them "the purity of that faith which was once delivered to the saints" (cf. Jude 3).¹⁴ His first impressions, however, were undone in the few contacts he had with different Indian people, plus unreliable information of the English settlers. Then he began to criticize harshly the supposed moral and spiritual purity of natives which deists liked to invoke in his defense of natural religion. Wesley went from one extreme to another, presenting a gloomy and, certainly, inappropriate and unfair picture of the Native American nations. Generally he disqualifies all of them, with some exception of the Choctaws, as "gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, liars" (§ 23), and other equally derogatory expressions. Moreover, he repeated maxims that have long circulated in the colonial metropolises like this: "as they [the Georgian Indians] have no letters, so they have no religion, no laws, no civil government" (§ 22).¹⁵ His judgment is particularly severe on the Creeks who are considered as the most refined hypocrites: "They know not what friendship or gratitude means. They show no inclination to learn anything, but least of all Christianity, being full as opiniated [sic!] of their own parts and wisdom as either modern Chinese or ancient Roman" (§ 28).¹⁶

Paradoxically in the sermon that warns readers against sectarianism, Wesley equates "natural religion" of "modern pagans", the Native Americans, to the works of the devil. Their practices boil down to "torture all their prisoners from morning to night, till at length they roast them to death; and upon the slightest undesigned provocation to come behind and shoot any of their own countrymen" (Sermon 38, *A Caution against Bigotry*, § I, 9, 1749).

It is needless to point out just how misguided and misinformed was Wesley's opinion. The alleged brutality of the native population constituted mere justification for their subjection to society of whites. But Wesley was not willing to legitimize the colonial enterprise. So he

¹⁴ Cf. *Letter to John Burton*, October 10, 1735. In: WJO, vol. XIII, p. 74.

¹⁵ The phrase recalls the Portuguese chronicler and author of the first history of Brazil, Pêro de Magalhães Gândavo (c. 1540 - c. 1580), which stated that due to the absence of three phonemes in the language of the Indians – *f*, *l* and *r* – they were doomed to live wildly, that is, without faith, law and religion. Also he considered them very aggressive, bellicose, inhuman, vindictive, dishonest and cruel.

¹⁶ *Journal*, December 2, 1737.

promptly seeks to attenuate his severe sentence by admitting that Europeans were not too far behind when the matter was the violence. “It were to be wished that none but heathens had practised such gross, palpable works of the devil. But we dare not say so. Even in cruelty and bloodshed, how little have the Christians come behind them!” (§ I, 10).

The supposed inferiority of those nations, beyond false, could not be used to legitimize imposition of Christianity and, even less, political and economic control over them. In his *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1773), Wesley refutes all the arguments that tend to present the slave trade as a rescue operation. Regions of Africa were not retrograde and fruitless areas, as slave traders claimed. Rather, African people were industrious, though they craved no more land than, in fact, it was needed. They lived in harmony with nature and with each other. Their kindness to strangers and care with the poor and sick were exemplary (cf. § II, 5-6, 11). This comprehensive description provided parameters that allowed their comparison with the English society, leading Wesley to inquire critically: “Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practicing the justice, mercy and truth, which are generally found among these poor Africans?” (Idem, § II, 11).

It must be underline the intense impression that the communitarian lifestyle of American and African natives exercised on the mind of Wesley. Somehow, he overcame his own prejudices and recognized that legitimate spiritual fruits, such as “justice, mercy and truth”, could be found even beyond Christianity.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, therefore, he mentions the fact elsewhere, as in the following entry from his *Journal*:

In the afternoon I visited many of the sick, but such scenes who could see unmoved? There are none such to be found in a pagan country. If any of the Indians in Georgia were sick (which indeed exceeding rarely happened, till they learned gluttony and drunkenness from the Christians), those that were near him gave him whatever he wanted. O who will convert the English into honest heathens! [February 8, 1753].¹⁸

Notwithstanding the rhetorical character of his discourse, the desire expressed by Wesley at conclusion of quoted passage suggests the following questions: would “honest heathens”, according to his thinking, be closer to holiness wanted by God than nominal Christians? How far

¹⁷ JENNINGS (2007, p. 79) comments: “Note well: ‘justice, mercy and truth’ the very characteristics that Wesley often associates with the renewed image of God”.

¹⁸ Cf. also Sermon 28, *Sermon on the Mount VIII*, 1747, § 9: “With regard to most of the commandments of God, whether relating to the heart or life, the heathens of Africa or America stand much on a level with those that are called Christians...”, especially concerning to Lord’s instruction: “lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth...” (Matt. 6:19).

is it possible to say that heathens have part in the saving work of God? Wesley proved to be aware of what was at stake in these issues and was not afraid to face them. “But it may be asked: ‘If there be no true love of our neighbour but that which springs from the love of God; and if the love of God flows from no other fountain than faith in the Son of God; does it not follow that the whole heathen world is excluded from all possibility of salvation?’” (Sermon 91, On Charity, § I, 3).

Answer of Wesley

... I have no authority from the Word of God “to judge those that are without”. Nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is 'the Father of the spirits of all flesh'; who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made [Sermon 130, On Living without God, § 14].

Cf. similar answer regarding to Jewish and muslims.

Resources of Wesleyan theology to reinterpret religious diversity today

Here are mentioned some significant elements of Wesley's thought to reinterpret religious pluralism at the current time, such as, understanding of revelation and salvation outside of Christianity, catholicity of grace, universal action of the Holy Spirit, inclusive dimension of his ecclesiology, concept of orthopathy, vision of holiness as perfection in love, etc.

Resources of Wesleyan praxis to build new relationships between religions

Accordingly to Wesley, true religion was more than simple adherence to correct opinions. Theology itself should be understood as “practical divinity”. Thus, authentic signs of faith ought to be recognized in life. For this reason, this section suggests some elements from praxis of the early Methodist communities which could contribute to construction of new paradigms in the relationship between religions, such as firm opposition to all forms of violence, defense of freedom of conscience and tolerance, complete aversion to sectarianism, affirmation of Catholic spirit, emphasis on humility, love and promotion of life, among others aspects.

Final considerations

It is possible to conclude that Wesley did reproduce many of the prejudices prevailing in his time and, on many occasions, sustained a discourse merely apologetic, so justifying Christian

exclusivism. Nevertheless, it is surprising how, from his understanding of prevenient grace of God, performing in every human being and in all cultures, he overcame sectarianism prevalent in his days, recognizing God's action far beyond the limits of institutional Church, in "the world beyond Christianity". One can without difficulty enumerate a series of attitudes capable of inspiring even today the praxis of Wesleyan communities as, for example, his firm opposition to religious violence, defense of freedom of conscience and tolerance, unlimited trust in God's gracious action beyond Christian boundaries, respect for diversity, strong emphasis on holiness of heart and life regardless of denominational ties, and adoption of the life as decisive criterion for evaluating religious practices in human society. To sum up, the understanding and practice of Wesley remain to be challenges for the 21st Century.

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