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United Methodism in the United States: Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Considerations

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Introduction

This paper for the Oxford Institute section on ecclesiology and *oikoumene* is an effort to take a careful look at ecclesiological issues facing the United Methodist Church in the United States and to move forward toward some ecumenical suggestions. The first draft was prepared at the request of the European Theological Commission Of the United Methodist Church for a consultation held in Vienna, Austria. I was asked to address the topic of the United Methodist Church in the multi-cultural society of the U.S.A. The intention was to contribute to the consultation by providing a look at Methodism in contemporary North American society. The topic is appropriate because Methodism throughout the world is linked closely to American Methodism. Until recently, however, Methodism

throughout the world has been little noticed by most in the U.S. There was little real understanding of the vital Christian witness and evangelical commitment of Methodists in places where the church is marginal. In recent years, however, this has changed. Greater attention to the global nature of Christianity, and of Methodism, has caused Methodists to be more interested in the work of the Church throughout the world. Changing conditions in the United States have made it clear that we have much to learn from Methodists who have always lived in a cultural context in which they were a minority people, in societies where state churches, other dominant expressions of Christianity, or open and strong opposition to Christian faith have been characteristic. Currently U.S. Methodists also recognize that conditions in other parts of the world may teach us a great deal about how Christianity, and Methodism, may look in the future, especially in relationship to other living world religions.

In this paper I first present a brief overview of the historic situation of Methodism in American society. Then I describe the changing conditions in American society, and especially the changing conditions for mainline Protestantism. I offer a picture of the contemporary shape of religion in the United States, so that the reality in which Methodism finds itself can be understood. Finally, I set forth my own prognosis for Methodism, and the United Methodist Church, in particular, in

component of that tradition, and has been particularly influential in the shaping of American culture. American Methodism and American culture have been inseparably intertwined since their beginnings.

A. Early American Methodism (1784-1816)

Methodism was present in America prior to 1784. Early Methodists from England had developed societies in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and numerous other cities and towns. The coming of Francis Asbury enhanced the growth of Methodism. But for the purposes of this article, I begin at the Christmas Conference of 1784. The Christmas Conference is important to any understanding of Methodism and American culture because it established several key matters. The Conference chose a name for the new church; it set a method for selecting leadership; it established structure for governance and mission; it provided ordained ministers and superintendents for the church; and it began a pattern of relationship to American culture.[3]

In England, Wesley had insisted that Methodism was a reform movement within the established Church of England. Whatever we make of his actions, he claimed that he himself, and his Methodist movement, never broke from the Church of England. He

[3] For fuller elaboration see my The Yoke of Obedience: The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism, Nashville: Abingdon, 1988, pp. 69-72

imagined Methodism as a church contributing to the new nation and shaping its cultural values.[4]

The choice of the name of the church is significant. We know from recollections of the Christmas Conference, and from the Discipline that it created, that the delegates understood the shape of the church Wesley proposed in the Sunday Service to be episcopal. Although he used the term "superintendent", the reality was that this was an "episcopal" office. The Conference decided, therefore, to name the church The Methodist Episcopal Church. Each word is significant. This was to be a "Methodist" church; it was to take its shape from Wesley and the Methodist movement in England and America. It was to be an "episcopal" church; the structure proposed by Wesley was clearly episcopal, and thus Methodism would be different from congregational or presbyterian churches. It was to be a "church". I emphasize this because one could imagine early American Methodists choosing to retain the Wesleyan self-understanding and conceive of themselves as a "society" in opposition to a "church". In fact, for years they retained images and language appropriate to an informal religious community. By the choice of a the name, however, they also declared themselves a "church", indicating

[4] See Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, Nashville: Abingdon, 1970. Also, the work of Thomas A. Langford, especially, Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition, Nashville: Abingdon, 1983, pp. 11-23.

believer was responsible for participating in shaping his or her salvation, and the specific populist approach to the common person combined to give Methodism special appeal. Methodism was popular because it met the needs of men and women where they were; and it had the itinerant ministry to reach them. American democratic individualism and Methodist teachings tended to be mutually reinforcing. Methodism enthusiastically embraced its context, even as it sought to make it Christian. Its commitment to "spread scriptural holiness across the land" represented both a critique and an embrace of the society.[5]

B. The Early Period Until The Civil War (1816--Civil War)

I have chosen 1816 as the beginning of another period of American Methodism because it is the year of Bishop Asbury's death. The leadership of Methodism was now no longer in the hands of men born in England, but of native-born Americans. In the period between 1816 and the Civil War (1850-60) certain patterns were set that became determinative for the Methodist Episcopal Church. The major point is that the church elected to be inclusive and culture affirming. Two key examples are the reactions to slavery and to the Civil War.

[5] See Russell E. Richey, Early American Methodism, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Also the work of Richard P. Heitzenrater, for instance, Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism, Nashville: Kingswood Press, 1989, especially pp. 189-204.

insisted on an absolutist position in favor, and some sought a middle ground. The various positions were reflective of reactions in the general society. Almost regardless of the section of the country, Methodism and American culture were difficult to distinguish. The church split before the nation divided; and both the Northern church and the Southern church became major advocates of their respective sides in the Civil War. Northern Bishop Matthew Simpson would talk about "the providence of God as seen in our war."

C. Triumphal Methodism: Post Civil War to 1924

In the years following the Civil War, American Methodism was increasingly culture affirming. In both the North and the South, Methodism sought to transform and control American society. There was tremendous growth in numbers, and significant upward mobility in terms of education, economic strength, and societal influence. Methodists built large and impressive church buildings in the major centers of cities. They wanted their denomination to be represented in the avenues of power, because Methodist laymen increasingly played that role themselves.

There was a particular boom in building at the time of the centennial of American Methodism in 1884. Along with large and impressive "centenary church" buildings came a formalization of

In 1850 1 in 3 church members was a Methodist

audience in America' for 'the Methodists represent the great middle class and in consequence are the most representative church in America.'"[8]

In their Episcopal Address to the Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference of 1900, the bishops stated that from 1800 to 1900 the ratio of Methodists to the general population went from one in fourteen to one in five. Membership went from 61,000 to more than 6 million. Everything looked very good. The Methodists were experiencing unbridled growth in ministry, new churches and church properties were being built, church literature was available and widely used, benevolences were booming, mission fields expanding, and philanthropies at an all-time high.[9]

One year later, in a statement to the Third Oecumenical Methodist Conference (forerunner of the World Methodist Council), John F. Goucher reported on American Methodism: "About one-third of all the people in the United States look to Methodism for their religious instruction and Christian ministries." He went on: "While Methodism is in no sense a political organization, its numerical strength and the vital character of its teachings, quickening the perceptions and conscience of its members, purifying morals, diffusing education, determining ideals, and developing character, have made it the most constructive force in

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[8]Marsden, p. 101.

[9]Episcopal Address, Methodist Episcopal Church Gneral Conference, 1900.

enact laws to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States. Francis Willard, of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, was a leading Methodist. Bishop James Cannon devoted almost his full time to the political movement that tried to capture the state legislatures so that they would have the votes to ratify a constitutional amendment.[13] The Volstead Act, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, was ratified in 1919. That political act, which sought to impose the moral convictions of Methodists, and other mainline Protestants, on the general society, suggests the power of the churches, and their supposition that they could, and should, control the culture. It is worth pondering the self conception of Methodism that is reflected in these exertions of authority and efforts at social control.

D. Post 1924 to the Present

Historians of Christianity in the United States have observed a "second disestablishment" of Protestant Christian America after 1924. The first disestablishment refers to the rejection of established churches in colonial America at the time of the affirmation of the Constitution, and in the early years of the new nation. The first disestablishment was intended to

[13]James Cannon, Jr., Bishop Cannon's Own Story: Life As I Have Seen It, Richard L. Watson, ed., Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1955.

nineteenth century, Methodism functioned as an unofficial established church. Methodism and American culture were intertwined. The twentieth century has seen a course reversal. While everything looked wonderful one hundred years ago, the in the course of the twentieth century some argue that, along with other major Protestant bodies, Methodism has moved from the mainline to the side line.

II. Changing Conditions for Mainline Protestantism

A great deal has been written in recent years about mainline Protestantism in the United States in the last half of the twentieth century. One can think of such works as William Hutchison's The Travail of Mainline Protestantism, Robert Wuthnow's The Restructuring of American Religion, William McKinney and Wade Clark Roof's American Mainline Religion, Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof's Beyond Establishment, James D. Hunter's Culture Wars, and the multivolume collection of materials about Presbyterians in America by John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, and Milton J. Coalter.

All of these works document a similar story. Mainline Protestantism is no longer dominant. It has lost cultural power. There has been a significant drop in membership. Its social influence has been eroded. The denominations, especially the

We need to remember, of course, that the loss of "establishment" is not unique to mainline, or liberal, Protestantism in the United States. We are part of a much larger reality across the world. Paul Johnson, in A History of Christianity, observes: "During the past half-century there has been a rapid and uninterrupted secularization of the West, which has all but demolished the Augustinian idea of Christianity as a powerful, physical and institutional presence in the world. Of Augustine's city of God on earth, little now remains, except crumbling walls and fallen towers, effete establishments and patriarchies of antiquarian rather than intrinsic interest. But of course Christianity does not depend on a single matrix: hence its durability. The Augustinian idea of public all-embracing Christianity, once so compelling, has served its purpose and retreats--perhaps, one day, to re-emerge in different forms."[15]

This larger picture of Christianity throughout the world helps to put the situation of mainline Protestantism into perspective. At the same time, it is important to understand the contemporary realities, and realistic prospects, for Protestantism in the United States.

III. The Contemporary Shape of Religion in the United States

[15] Paul Johnson, A History of Christianity. New York: Atheneum, 1977, pp. 516-517.

majority of Americans, their numbers are declining, and they are becoming increasingly fragmented.

Adherents to living world religions other than Christianity make up a small percentage of the population. Judaism, with 1.8 percent, which represents 4.3 million people, is the largest non-Christian group. Some estimates put the number of Jews higher, but not above 5.5 million. The difference may be attributable to those who claim religious identity of Judaism and those who claim no religious identity but are identified culturally as Jews. Muslims represent one-half of one percent, which is 1.4 million people. Of those who identify themselves as Muslims, 40 percent are Black. Of the total Black population, however, less than two percent is Muslim. There are approximately one million Buddhists, under one-half of one percent, and half a million Hindus. Significantly, the survey found that most AsianAmericans and most Arab-Americans are Christian, rather than Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. The reason for this seems to be that Christians from Arab and Asian countries are more likely to move to the United States than other persons.

Recent studies of religion in America suggest several observable patterns. The most obvious is that Americans remain religious. The growth of Roman Catholicism in the United States is dramatic. Protestantism remains strong, but is changing. The percentage of the population which claims to be Protestant is

certain extent, in our major cities. We do not know enough about other religions, and we do not know how to think in a sophisticated way about the relationship of Christianity to other religions. But the average American is not encountering significant presence of persons from other faiths within the United States, at least not yet.

Perhaps the challenging reality for Christianity in America today is not other faith traditions, but a growing societal conviction that any religion is tolerable as long as it remains personal and individual and does not make claims on the general social order. While at one time Christianity played a public role in shaping moral values and societal norms, today that role is limited as the result of court cases, legislation, and cultural attitudes. Stephen J. Carter, a professor of law at Yale University, recently wrote a book called The Culture of Disbelief in which he argues that the press, the educational establishment, the government, the courts, and the entertainment media are fostering a negative attitude toward all religion. This may represent the greatest challenge to Christianity, and to other religions as well, in America today. The history of the United States demonstrates that religion has always been a vital, culture shaping reality. This has been so because it has played a significant role in social institutions and the general society. Currently this continues to be the case. Professor

twentieth century, Methodism played a dominant cultural role in American society, it can now be argued that Methodism is increasingly marginal as are all of the once-powerful Protestant denominations. I think such a conclusion both premature and inaccurate. There are considerable strengths which endure. Perhaps a useful concept to employ is that of a "residual establishment." Images and understandings of prior strength are no longer workable, but neither is it the case that the United Methodist Church is insignificant. We are a residual establishment in that many of the institutional realities remain. One need only think of hundreds of thousands of congregations, hundreds of colleges and universities, thirteen theological schools, numerous homes for children and for the aged, many hospitals, buildings, boards and agencies, programs, publishing interests, and pension funds. I could mention other examples, including billions of dollars in various endowments to support the varied work of the church and its mission. The United Methodist Church has enormous resources that are both opportunities and problems. On the one hand, there is undeniable evidence of membership decline, and of less social and cultural influence. On the other, there is continuing vitality in congregations and institutions. These strengths counter the thesis of decline. The real problem is how we are going to think about ourselves. What are we going to do to seize this moment?

other countries around the world to provide growth for United Methodism as it declines in the United States. If we define ourselves as a world church, we might be able to maintain our image as big, powerful, world-wide, growing, and successful. Let me emphasize that not all efforts to deal with the legitimate global dimensions of United Methodism fit this description, but we need to recognize that there is this aspect to talk of our global character. It can be a dangerous new kind of United Methodist triumphalism.

2. **Reverse the decline and recover the institution.** The previous alternative does not seriously believe that reversal is possible, rather the attitude is to make the best of the situation. A second alternative proposes to reverse the decline. There has been a great deal proclaimed and written about ways that mainline Protestantism, and the United Methodist Church in particular, can turn around the situation I have described. Church growth strategies propose all manner of techniques for adjusting to changed cultural circumstances. These include unapologetic efforts to build mega-churches, the abandoning of small churches (they are inefficient), calls for less attention to theology, and for greater attention to management models that answer the self-perceived needs of as many people as possible. Some argue that training for ministry needs to go on in the local

the church, and would probably accelerate the decline in membership.

4. **Bring about radical change with new leadership.** This proposal suggests that renewal of the church requires empowerment of those who have previously not been among the leaders of the church. The thesis is that the future of the church will depend on its ability to serve and include the diverse peoples increasingly characteristic of North American society, especially Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African Americans, and other ethnic minority groups. Few would argue against the view that the church must adjust to the changing demographics of the U.S., especially in regard to multicultural issues. The question is whether ethnic minority leadership can address the realities of mainline Protestantism at the turn of the century any better than any one else. Is a particular kind of leadership the key to renewal in the church?

5. **Worry less about the institution and give priority to theology, witness, mission, and ministry.** This alternative proposes to relax about the institutional manifestations of the church, and let some of the machinery go. We might neither reject the institution nor maintain it for its own sake. Recognition of the residual establishment allows us to appreciate the incredible gifts that previous generations of believers have

theology has no particular institutional interest, but the interest of communication of a positive gospel to a hurting world is our abiding interest. The Wesleyan movement was born as a minority movement in a context where there was an established Christianity. It was in the United States where, for unique historical and cultural reasons, that Wesleyan movement became a dominant institutional expression of Christianity. We, in the United States, need to learn from our Wesleyan brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, that a dominant institutional expression is not necessarily what we are called to be. Our primary concern should be the positive preaching of the gospel of grace and freedom. We are called to follow Mr. Wesley: "Offer them Christ."

Methodism needs to emphasize its connectional character throughout the world, but this connection is, in the first place, to be understood theologically, not institutionally. We are in a time when decentralization is the order of the day. The United Methodist Church cannot maintain huge bureaucratic boards and agencies. At the same time, we need dynamic ministries of cooperation throughout the world. This is one of the special possibilities for United Methodism as a global church in mission. What we mean by global church, however must be carefully and

the course of the twentieth century. All over the world, by the last quarter of the century, he writes, "Catholicism appeared to have joined Protestantism and Orthodoxy in a posture of decline. Yet it must be asked: is the expression 'decline' appropriate? If the claims of Christianity are true, the number of those who publicly acknowledge them is of small importance; if they are not true, the matter is scarcely worth discussing. In religion, quantitative judgments do not apply. What may, in the future seem far more significant about this period is the new ecumenical spirit, the offspring of the Second Vatican Council."[17]

My hope and optimism come from my conviction that the church of Jesus Christ is of God, and will endure until the end of time. Methodism is one expression of the larger church. Wesleyan theology has particular insights to contribute to the larger church. But, in the end, what matters is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Exactly how the future will turn out, we do not know. But we can be certain that God is in our future; and our hope is that God is not finished with us yet. There is still ministry for the people called Methodist as long as we have breath. Our calling is to be faithful in our response.

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[17]Johnson, pp. 513-14.