2002-5 NC - "Combining Tolerance & Religio - to bind Together and Conviction: The Challenge of Pluralism

Christian Mission and Globalization Working Group

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Are there resources within the Wesleyan tradition that can undergird dialogue between the major religions to counteract the exploitation of religious differences for political, ideological and military purposes?

To be sure, dialogue has not been high on the Christian agenda in the past, for Christians have been among the most aggressive of the world's religions in seeking converts, often benefiting from western colonialism and economic expansionism in the process. The "great commission" has, however, defined our missionary calling from the beginning. "Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'"(Mt. 28:18-20, NRSV). Ignore for the moment the fact that Scripture scholars tell us that the words, with their reference to the Trinity, are probably not traceable to Jesus himself. Nevertheless they have informed the vocation of the church down through the ages, and at no time more than during the past two centuries when the missionary activities of the Wesleyan churches have extended into the far corners of the world.

Moreover, the great commission is intensified by the theology supplied by Acts 4:12 (which to English ears sounds more absolute in the King James version). Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." And John's gospel adds: "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father but by me"(14:6). Jesus is the way to salvation for all humankind, therefore, and

only where this saving knowledge of God is made available is eternal life with God possible. Where this name is not known and confessed, the opposite seems inevitable, eternal separation from God.

This sharp posing of the question supplied the strong motivation for missionary activity, for the fate of humankind rested upon the shoulders of those who have been blessed with the indispensable access to the divine through Christ. Not to respond to this missionary call is to be responsible not only for our own failure but for the lost estate of those to whom we have not brought the saving knowledge. A stronger motivation can scarcely be imagined. It pertains not only to the eternal destiny of others but of ourselves as well, for we are the ones called to make disciples of Christ in all the nations.

To do justice to these Scripture passages, however, we need to add one more, one also attributed to Peter and found in Acts 10:34f. Peter is sought out by Cornelius, a Roman centurion friendly to the Jews but himself a pagan Gentile. Nevertheless, he is described as "an upright and God-fearing man." And Peter adds that Cornelius has helped him to see that God does not play favorites. Although God has reached out in a special way to the Jews, God is through his Spirit active in the lives of Gentiles as well. "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality," says Peter, "but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (RSV).

John Wesley chooses this passage to illustrate the power of prevenient grace. Even prior to the knowledge of Christ, if one responds to prevenient grace so as to be "taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion," one has entered into a process that can lead to an increasing "tendency toward life, [to] some degree of salvation". Wesley considers the Muslim

scholar Hai Ebn Yokton an example of prevenient grace in action, for this Muslim's life "contains all the principles of pure religion and undefiled"(cf. James 1:27) (Wesley, *Works* [Bicentennial edition], Sermon "On Faith," 3:494f.). Wesley quotes Acts 10:35 to make the point that even prior to the knowledge of Christ "whosoever in every nation believes thus far, the Apostle Peter declares is 'accepted of [God].' He actually is at that very moment in a state of acceptance,...'the wrath of God' no longer 'abideth on him'" (3:497).

Does Wesley provide us a basis here for fruitful dialogue between religions, the kind of dialogue being called for from all sides as we see the tragic results of the conflicts between religions, not only between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and Jews and Muslims in Israel, but between Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan, and Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and Indonesia? In his sermon, "On Zeal," Wesley estimates that forty million persons have been killed in wars of religion since the time of the Reformation, killed in the *zeal* for religious truth. But how is this reconcilable in any way with the truth of Christianity?, he asks. "For it is a certain truth (although little understood in the world) that Christian zeal is all love. The love of God and man fills up its whole nature"(3:466f). And he adds, "If true Christian zeal be nothing other than the flame of love, then *hatred* in every kind and degree...is so far from deserving the name of zeal that it is directly opposite to it.... Then *bigotry* of every sort, and above all the spirit of *persecution*, are totally inconsistent with it"(3:470). The starting point and presupposition for any dialogue, therefore, from Wesley's standpoint would be *love*, love directed precisely toward those with whom we disagree, love toward "Heathens, Jews, Turks, Papists, heretics, to every soul which God hath made" (*Works* [Jackson edition], 11:191).

The second presupposition would be the trinitarian nature of the activity of God as seen in

Wesley's doctrine of *prevenient grace*. If the Creator Spirit is active from the beginning in all creation, then the Spirit is God's freedom to be present and active in the lives of human beings everywhere. Moreover, wherever the Spirit is active, saving power is at work and there is, as Wesley says, "some degree of salvation." The "acceptance by God" to which Peter refers is in some sense akin to (though not the same as) justification by Christ through faith. The similarity is contained in the trinitarian doctrine that the three persons are united in the actions *ad extra*. Therefore, God's acceptance through the Spirit is not apart from Christ. The grace eternally operative in the Trinity is what the Incarnation makes explicitly manifest in the flesh and in the world. But even without the explicit knowledge of Christ, God's Spirit extends to humanity everywhere the power to oppose evil and to champion good. Through the Logos operative in the Trinity,

> The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of His death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of His death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer His grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy. [Here Wesley is describing views held by the Quakers with which he agrees.] (*Works* [Jackson edition], 10:178).

Wesley continues, "Is it not one God 'who works in' us and in them, 'both to will and to do'? They who, by this help, do the things contained in the law, we grant, 'are not the objects of God's wrath'" (*ibid.*, 9:268). If the Spirit of God is universally active, however, among non-Christians as well as Christians, has not Wesley undermined the very thing he declares to be basic to Christian mission, to "share Christ"?

(3) This leads to the third point Wesley would presuppose in entering into dialogue: What makes Christianity distinctive? It lies in the nature of the *relationship* between God and believers. According to Wesley, one who is obedient to the highest that he knows, who lives by the law, has the relation to God of a *servant*. He knows God as his Lord and Master to whom he must be obedient and whom he must seek to please. So far, so good. But another kind of relationship to God is made available by Christ, that of a *son*, or daughter a relationship made possible by experiencing the love of God directed toward ~~him or her~~ us, a love that enables the son or daughter of God to testify, "The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (3:497f. [Bicentennial edition]). This encounter with divine love through Christ is what makes the Christian relation to God distinctive. Moreover, Christians claim that this is the kind of relation that God desires to have with every human being, the kind made available by encountering God through the one who revealed the Divine as Abba, Father. That revelation includes the communication to our hearts of God's own self-giving through the Son.

But does not this way of making things right (justification) and restoring the image of God through love (sanctification) ~~not~~ negate and declare invalid the kind of relation to God made possible by the other higher religions? Yet, according to Wesley, Christians do not approach the adherents of other faiths with threats of condemnation and eternal separation from God. Condemnation is not called for, says Wesley, "because I have no authority from the Word of God to judge those who are [outside] the Christian dispensation. Nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation" (4:174). Insofar as they are faithful to that which they know they are "accepted of God." Instead of condemnation, Christians approach them with a positive promise: through the encounter with Christ's love "you shall see greater things than these" (3:497).

We now return to the Scripture passages with which we began to see if from this perspective we can throw new light on them. In John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me," *Father* in the sentence is defined by *me.* The particular life and death packed into the word "me" gives the word "Father" its specific content and communicative power. Understood in this way, the claim of the early church which the evangelist puts on the lips of Jesus makes perfectly good sense in terms of Jesus' own mission, to say nothing of his own unique name for God, "Abba." No one can come to "Abba," i.e., to "God-revealed-through-Jesus," without Jesus. This would not be the case if Jesus' revelation of God were certain ideas about God or certain laws which we could very well find elsewhere. But precisely because revelation is not ideas but an event in which we are taken into a relation with Abba, and because relations always bear the imprint of the contingency which brought them into being, the *telos* of relation to God available in the communication through Jesus is simply not available elsewhere. This is not a dogmatic, offensive claim, but simply a statement regarding the contingency of relationships and the character of different relationships. Hasidic Judaism – Buber?

This is further clarified when we turn to the other passage which would seem to rule out a dialogue between religions, Acts 4:12. Does Peter in Acts 10 contradict what he says in Acts 4? non-Xns accepted by God First, what is the context? Peter has been brought before the high priest and temple authorities charged with disturbing the peace. He testifies that he has healed persons, one of whom is present as a witness, by invoking the name of the crucified Nazarene and, moreover, that there is "none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." If we understand "saved" as generations of our forebears have, as "going to heaven" (with the implication that if one is not "saved" they are headed in the opposite direction), then of course the passage stands as

an offense to all who have not publicly assented to the Lordship of Jesus but who nonetheless do not feel damned for not having done so. But If we understand "saved" as having to do with this life (as the passage itself clearly indicates, for Peter is pointing to a lame man who has been healed, made whole, saved in this life) and see "salvation" as a new kind of existence in the quality of relationship with God made available through the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, then here again it should be clear that this kind of relation is not possible apart from the message from Jesus. As we know, the term "name" is in the Scriptures shorthand for the whole person, their life, their work, their interaction, the total impact of their existence. What is at stake, therefore, is not so much a formalized assent to a name understood as an abstract noun but instead receiving a Word spoken to us out of the total self-giving of Jesus' life. It is impossible without this "name," i.e., the impact of this life, to be related to God in the same way as with it. The character of the relationship would of necessity be different.

Recognizing the difference Jesus has made in our relationship to God means, however, recognizing the role of the Spirit in making that difference possible. For it is through the Spirit that the love expressed in Christ becomes a present reality, is communicated to us, making us participants in God's own life. "There is no love of God but from a sense of his loving us," says Wesley (1:191). Love cannot be appropriated as an abstract idea; it must be encountered, it must be an energy that is participated in. And the Spirit mediates this energy.

However, the Spirit carries the blessings of the Son to places where the Son's name is not known. Therefore, our task is to discern the traces of God's saving power as they appear in non-Christian religions and cultures, convinced that God "did not leave himself without witness" (Acts 14:17). And these traces can provide the basis for dialogue leading to greater appreciation and

understanding between religions.

Admittedly, we approach the dialogue from a perspective. Likewise, every religion enters into dialogue from a perspective, and frankly admitting this is no hindrance to genuine exchange. We "test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1), and the plumb line we use is the Spirit of Christ. But the Spirit of Christ is not narrow. "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold" (Jn. 10:16). Our ultimate goal may be one fold and one shepherd, but our immediate goal must be to recognize the *servants* of God among other religions willing to be our dialogue partners and to work together with them to reduce the exploitation of religious differences for political, ideological and military purposes.

Therefore, it seems to me that we have resources enough in our Wesleyan heritage for this kind of meaningful, practical and all-important dialogue, especially as we recognize the common mission to which prevenient grace and the promptings of the Spirit are calling us.

Dialogue need not mean that we abandon "the great commission," however, for dialogue means sharing. And as we share not only the letter but the Spirit of our Christian heritage, we will arouse the curiosity of those with whom we dialogue to know more about this Christ who communicates the love of God.

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