Telling the right stories, desiring the right things: value as a foundation for Methodist renewal

Introduction

'He made you; and he made you to be happy in him; and nothing else can make you happy.'[1]

This was John Wesley's response to the catechetic question, 'For what end did God create man?'. He considered that the official response ('to glorify God') would be no more understood by 'the generality of common people' than they understood Greek. Wesley pressed home his point by observing that few 'even of those that are called Christians' understood: 'Many indeed think of being happy with God in heaven; but the being happy in God on earth never entered their thoughts'.[2]

The theological problem underlying the connection that Wesley makes between happiness and God becomes apparent later in his sermon. Writing at the beginning of the Enlightenment, the fruits of which continue to exercise theologians, Wesley was arguing against the 'rational religion' of figures such as Hutcheson, Rousseau, Voltaire and Hume.[3] Whereas, for Wesley, 'true religion is right tempers towards God and man',[4] these men of letters 'extol humanity to the skies, as the very essence of religion…they have found out both a religion and a happiness which have no relation at all to God, nor any dependence upon him'.[5] Happiness was significant, not just because it was language that the 'generality of common people' could understand, but because it was also the measure by which those 'men of letters' defined moral sentiment. Adam Smith, for example, considered happiness 'to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature' when creating humanity.[6] By arguing that practical divinity involved an essential connection between

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[1] John Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', Sermon 114, in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Available at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.vii.vi.html?highlight=114#highlight, [Accessed 28/9/2017], §10.
[2] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §11.
[3] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §18-19.
[4] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §16.
[5] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §19.
[6] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* ed. by D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984, [1759]), available at https://christiandemocraticunion.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-by-adam-smith-1759.pdf [Accessed 31 July 2018], III.5.7.

holiness and happiness,[7] Wesley was grounding both common experience and philosophical theory 'in the very life of God'.[8]

In this sermon, Wesley was addressing the two basic needs that Paul Tillich identifies as being fundamental to the work of theology: 'the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation'.[9] Unfortunately, Wesley did so more by assertion and rhetoric than by reasoned argument. Whereas Wesley could rely on the disapprobation of his readers to dismiss the men of letters as 'neither better nor worse than Atheists',[10] this will no longer work in a time when 'New Atheist' is worn as a badge of honour.

Help is at hand from an unexpected direction. Richard Norman, a Vice-Chair of Humanists UK and an heir to Wesley's men of letters, approaches the question of happiness from the opposite direction to Wesley by asking, 'Are atheists missing something important?'.[11] In a paper that explores the boundaries of religious an non-religious experience, Norman questions whether there are any experiences that are 'integral components of human life' (and thus equivalent to Wesley's 'happiness') that are accessible only to theists.[12] In doing so, he acknowledges the importance of biblical narratives for expressing the ethical norms of our culture. Norman compares the story of a baby 'born in an outhouse to lowly parents' with stories that 'glamorize power and wealth and violence', concluding that what is important is to tell 'the right story' – a story that is, in some sense, true.[13] What he does not explain is how to distinguish between a 'right story' and one that is not true. Just as Wesley relied on the assumptions of his readers to reject atheism and accept his association of happiness with being 'in the mind of Christ',[14] so Norman relies on his readers to reject power, wealth and violence in favour of what he regards as truth.

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[7] D. Stephen Long & Stanley Hauerwas, 'Theological Ethics', in William J. Abraham & James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.635-646, p.635.
[8] Long & Hauerwas, 'Theological Ethics', p.646.
[9] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p.5.
[10] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §20.
[11] Richard Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', in John Cottingham (ed), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp.91-110, p.91.
[12] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.91. For a discussion of the connotations of happiness as lifelong fulfilment or as a subjective psychological episode, see Julia Annas, 'Happiness as Achievement', *Daedalus,* 133:2, 44-51.
[13] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.100.
[14] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §22.

In this paper I will suggest that the rhetorical gaps exhibited by Wesley and Norman arise because both are concerned with the question of how we justify what is of value in our lives, and that this problem of justifying true values provides a solution to the problem of connecting the Christian message with experience. In the first section I will define value and seek to ground this definition in the Bible. In the second section I will consider what it means for values to be true. I will conclude by reflecting on the implications of this discussion for revival, reform and renewal in global Methodism.

Part I: Values

Values defined

The primary role of values is to enable us to act, making it possible to choose one object or course of action as better than another. Indeed, it is by choosing that we demonstrate what it is that we value.[15] By extension, when engaged in thinking as a form of action, values enable us to identify some beliefs as better than others, because we consider them to be true, for example.[16]

A value can be understood in either a personal or a more generalised way. 'To value' something can mean simply to like it, in which case there is no expectation that anyone else should also like it.[17] However, to judge something to be valuable introduces a second-order meaning, inviting justification and hence an expectation that others should also value the same thing.[18] An impersonal value does not involve simply what is good *for me*; it makes a general statement about what *is good*.

The 'something' that is valued may be of different types, invoking different forms of good. Thus, art will invoke aesthetic values, and ethics, moral values for example. Significantly, this characteristic makes it possible to understand how scientific and other theories engage cognitive values (such as relevance, consistency and economy of explanation), whilst purporting to remain 'value-free' as to their content.[19]

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[15] R.T. Allen, *The Structure of Value* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993), p.40.
[16] Hugh Lacey, *Is Science Value Free? Values and Scientific Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.52.
[17] Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.92.
[18] Michael J. Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2001), pp.2-4.
[19] Lacey, *Is Science Value Free?*, p.259.

Philosophers account for the characteristics of values in a variety of ways. Joel Kupperman, for example, suggests that we are able to argue rationally about values because emotion involves an element of intention as well as feeling and motivation.[20] On this account, shared values require a shared feeling of delight in what is good or abhorrence of what is bad.[21] However, this implies mutual agreement on what is 'good *for me*' that stops short of an objective statement of what 'is good' in relation to the object. Marcel Lieberman provides a basis for impersonal values while maintaining their motivating force on individuals by grounding them in the mental attitude of desire.[22] As a process of the imagination (albeit one accompanied by emotion), a desire and its satisfaction are open to justification and scrutiny in a way that emotions are not. Elizabeth Anderson, while agreeing that value involves a positive mental attitude (a 'pro-attitude'), rejects a monistic account of value in terms of desire. In her pluralist theory of value, she suggests that objects are valued in different ways. For example, 'there are different forms of love, such as romantic, parental and fraternal, and there are ways of valuing things that are not love at all, such as respect and admiration'.[23]

Yet, to value an object in an impersonal sense is not simply to desire, love, respect or admire it, but to hold that the object is intrinsically worthy of such pro-attitudes. Lieberman argues that we *believe* that our desire (or, following Anderson, our pro-attitude) is good. It is this element of belief that makes a claim for rational justification, enabling us to attribute goodness to the object itself, rather than to our own personal response to it.[24]

A value can be defined as the belief that a pro-attitude towards an object is good. To value an object thus involves two mental attitudes: a pro-attitude towards the object, and a belief that this attitude is good.

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[20] Joel Kupperman, *Value…And What Follows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.25.
[21] Kupperman, *Value…And What Follows*, p.34.
[22] Marcel S. Lieberman, *Commitment, Value and Moral Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.116.
[23] Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, p.5.
[24] Lieberman, *Commitment, Value and Moral Realism*, p.128.

Values defined in the Bible

'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'.[25] For humankind to have seen what God had made and called it good would have been an expression of personal value. But, the association of goodness directly with God is to make God the objective source of goodness. In the second creation story, God planted the tree of the knowledge, and by eating of it Adam and Eve became like God in their discernment, not of likes and dislikes, but of good and evil. Throughout the Bible, God is the source of goodness: 'Why do you call me good?' Jesus asked. 'No one is good – except God alone'.[26]

God is the reference point for all goods, not just the goodness of a particular type of object. Perhaps the most extreme example is the way in which the prophets regarded even suffering as a good that was attributable to God: 'Therefore the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares…I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge your dross and remove all your impurities…Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City'.[27] By the time that John's Gospel was written, God's role in suffering-as-disguised-goodness had given way to the personification of the 'evil one'.[28] Yet, the comprehensiveness of God's goodness is manifest in the variety of the 'I am' sayings in John: the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine; each embodying goodness in a different form.

The goodness of God is made known not only in different types of object, but also in a variety of different mental attitudes inspired by God. These include attitudes responding to the goodness of God: attitudes of praise (Psalm 150, the Magnificat), of reverence (Moses by the burning bush, Mary anointing Jesus with oil), of awe (Moses on the mountain surrounded by cloud and fire, the transfiguration of Jesus). Other attitudes, such as righteousness (Matthew 5:6), love (John 15:12), wisdom (Proverbs 2:6), justice and mercy (Micah 6:8) are attributed to God and are to be emulated by humanity.

The central concern that runs through the Bible's various accounts of human interaction with God is the belief that the panoply of pro-attitudes towards God's goodness are good

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[25] Genesis 1:31, *Holy Bible: New International Version ("NIV")* (Hodder & Stoughton e-book)
[26] Mark 10:18, *NIV*
[27] Isaiah 1:24-26, *NIV*
[28] John 17:15, *NIV*

attitudes to have. There are different ways in which this belief is expressed. At times there are explicit imperatives concerning what is good – such as the ten commandments or Paul's teaching about love. In other places, expressions of belief about what is good are implicit, for example in Jesus' parables. Belief is also fostered through liturgical actions such as the cleanliness laws of Leviticus and the institution of the Eucharist. The very writing of the Bible, in the forms and genres of its books, is also designed to demonstrate and promote belief in the right attitudes towards God; for example, 'The beginning of the good news [gospel] about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God'.[29]

The Bible is an expression of God as the source of all that is good. It is a protracted and many-faceted exhortation to believe that the pro-attitudes associated with God – including reverence, justice, mercy and love – are good attitudes to have. All else that the Bible contains, including poetry, history, prophecy, wisdom, theology, it is centred on God; it articulates what is believed to be of value.

Part II: The truth of values

The two-way orientation of values

The definition of a value combines two mental attitudes: belief and a pro-attitude (such as desire). Elizabeth Anscombe has observed that belief and desire have opposite 'directions of fit'.[30] Whereas a belief describes the world as it is, and is *true* to the extent that its proposition conforms with the world, a desire describes a future state and is *satisfied* to the extent that the world conforms with its proposition.

Anscombe's observation about the future-orientation of desire also applies to other pro-attitudes that feature in values. This is precisely because they are 'pro-'. The desire for something, or the love of it or the reverence for it constitute a directive for the will to act in such a way that the positive commitment that has already been made is fulfilled. This is the case even if the object of a pro-attitude is currently not fulfilled. For example, we may desire

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[29] Mark 1:1, *NIV*
[30] Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Cited in Tim Schroeder, 'Desire', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/desire/ [Accessed 29 July 2016].

equality of pay for men and women despite recognising that this attitude is currently unfulfilled.

The second element in the definition of value – belief – contributes to the motivation for action by grounding the object of the will in a belief that it is good, not just for the individual, but of itself, objectively. As Anscombe observed, beliefs are attitudes that are oriented towards the present and are either true or false. The component of belief makes it possible to give reasons for holding values independently of one's own desire or other pro-attitudes towards it.[31] A value will be true if the belief that a pro-attitude is good is true.

Fact and value

For a value to be true suggests that it is a fact. However, there is a long tradition, starting with David Hume, that distinguishes between facts and values. Hume argued that, contrary to 'every system of morality' which he had 'hitherto met', direct inference from the *is* of belief to the pro-attitude of *ought* is not valid.[32] He resolved the two-way tension at the heart of value by arguing that moral feelings, rather than reason, were the source of motivation for the will.[33] Values (based on emotion) thus became separated from facts (based on reason). In the twentieth century, this distinction was taken up by G.E. Moore, who dubbed the attribution of value to an object as a property, the 'naturalistic fallacy'.[34] Postmodern critics of positivism have responded by arguing that facts themselves are no more than expressions of value, suggesting that belief itself is a pro-attitude.[35] Others have sought to mediate between reason and will in more nuanced ways. Hilary Putnam, for example, distinguishes between epistemic and ethical values, and points to the role that both play in ethics as well as science, arguing that if we are to be able to discuss values, we must not separate them entirely from facts.[36]

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[31] Lieberman, *Commitment, Value and Moral Realism*, p.116.

[32] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Selby-Bigge, 1888), available at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Treatise_of_Human_Nature/Book_3:_Of_morals/Part_1/Section_1 [Accessed 31 July 2018], §III.1.1.

[33] Joshua May, 'Because I Believe it is the Right Thing to Do', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16 (2013), 791-808, p.792.

[34] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica,* available at http://fair-use.org/g-e-moore/principia-ethica/chapter-ii [Accessed 31 July 2018], §II.24

[35] For example, Conor McHugh, 'The Truth Norm of Belief', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly,* 92 (2012), 8-30.

[36] Hilary Putnam, 'The Entanglement of Fact and Value', in Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp.28-45, p.44

At the heart of this debate is the tension within values between the future-oriented pro-attitude and the present-oriented belief. The difficulty can be understood by returning to the example of equal pay. The belief that men and women are paid equally is, empirically, false. However, this fact would not prevent somebody from maintaining the truth of their belief that men and women *should* be paid the same, because men and women are believed to be already of equal value in some respect *other than* pay. This belief might be expressed, for example, as: 'it is good for men and women to be paid equally because I believe that they are equally good teachers'; or 'it is good for men and women to be paid the same because I believe they have equal dignity as human beings'.

What is striking about these statements of belief concerning goodness is that they require a particular evaluation of the facts in order to justify the pro-attitude. The equality of men and women with respect to pay can be believed to be good so long as what makes them men and women is valued in such a way as to be equal. This can be illustrated more generally by the theory of Christian virtue developed by Sam Wells and Stanley Hauerwas. They argue that Christian virtue is defined in relation to the *telos* of the saint, whereas Aristotle's notion of virtue was defined in relation to the *telos* of the hero.[37] Each *telos* gives rise to a respective set of virtues: a good hero behaves differently from a good saint. This means that, if one wishes to behave virtuously, one first has first to decide which *telos* to aim for. One's belief about what makes a good human being depends upon one's belief as to what sort of human being one wants to be. In short, what is believed to be good depends upon what one values.

What emerges, is an infinite regress of values. The belief that a pro-attitude is good invokes a further value to define what is good (a good man or woman, a virtuous human being). This value, too, is a belief that a particular pro-attitude is good; so it too invokes a further value in order to define what is good; and so on. By valuing something, we make a factual claim that what we value is a property of the object and not merely a reflection of our own preferences. Yet, we can only justify this claim by calling on a further chain of values to define what it is that we hold to be good.

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[37] Sam Wells, 'The Disarming Virtue of Stanley Hauerwas', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52:1 (1999), 170-180, p.172.

Ultimacy, revelation and faith

The chain of values that is required to justify the belief that a pro-attitude is good will only continue for as long as an explanation of what is believed to be good is demanded. An 'ultimate belief' is one that is held to be self-evident because no further justification is required.[38] Benjamin McCraw suggests that such beliefs become entrenched and 'central to our noetic structure'.[39] This is because beliefs about what is 'ultimately significant or valuable in life' provide the foundations for a structure of beliefs, and so come to have 'tremendous implications for other beliefs, commitments, actions, and our general way of life'.[40] Such ultimate beliefs are not easily changed, because many other beliefs and values are derived from them. They constitute a 'doxastic commitment' on the basis of the structures that are built upon them.[41]

Richard Norman's example of the Nativity as a 'right story' is an example of ultimate belief. It is possible that he could have provided further justification for the valuing of love and humility over power, wealth and violence, but he did not feel the need to do so: these truths were self-evident. In the other four examples of 'essentially human' experiences that he gives, Norman likewise justifies his position by drawing on ultimate beliefs. The authority of the moral 'ought' is founded on belief in the autonomy of the human person.[42] The experience of beauty in art communicates 'human truths' such as the possibility of rising above suffering.[43] The experience of transcendence is shaped by the otherness of inanimate nature, which derives its otherness from the belief that humans are characterised by their 'wisdom and intelligence'.[44] The experience of vulnerability and fragility enables us to distinguish between what is superficial and what 'really matters'.[45]

Norman provides a reasoned case for valuing these five 'core' human experiences. However, his chain of reasoning cannot proceed for ever. It comes to rest on a series of beliefs

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[38] Isaac Levi, *The Fixation of Belief and Its Undoing: Changing Beliefs Through Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.161.
[39] Benjamin McCraw, 'Faith and Trust', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion,* 77 (2015),141-158, p.151.
[40] McCraw, 'Faith and Trust',p.151.
[41] Isaac Levi, *The Fixation of Belief and Its Undoing*, p.8.
[42] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.92.
[43] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.98.
[44] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.105.
[45] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', p.106.

regarding what constitutes goodness. These are beliefs in which Norman has faith. We might say that they are *revealed* to be true, for they have no other foundation.

Community and stories

Revelation presupposes a community of people who share an ultimate belief as to what is good. The belief requires no further justification precisely because it is accepted as self-evidently true by members of that community

Communitarian theories of truth have flourished in response to the post-modern 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'.[46] Having rejected a power dynamic that assumes (and imposes) the validity one meta-narrative for the whole of humanity, smaller groups nevertheless continue to define their identity, in part, by allegiance to a meta-narrative that is true 'for us'. Thus, Stanley Hauerwas argues that 'the truth of Christian convictions cannot be divorced from the kind of community the church is and should be'.[47] A more far-reaching communitarian approach is to be found in the 'worldview' philosophy that David Naugle describes as 'one of the most significant developments in the recent history of the church'.[48] By sharing a worldview, a community is defined, not just by its ethics, but by the way in which it 'conceptualizes reality'.[49]

Justifying the truth of values in terms of an ultimate belief in which a community has faith requires only a limited view of communitarian truth. This is because an ultimate belief – in the goodness of love for example – is so abstract that it can serve to justify a large number of beliefs concerning derivative goods, which in turn are able to support diverse values. For example, the church has shown itself capable of generating a wide range of values on the basis of shared ultimate beliefs. This becomes particularly apparent when Christian salvation is considered in relation to other faiths. Alistair McGrath, who describes himself as a 'particularist' characterises the 'pluralist' position of John Hick as 'little more than an intellectual satellite of the Enlightenment, linked with its totalizing and homogenizing

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[46] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), available at: http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Lyotard-PostModernCondition1-5.html [Accessed 31 July 2018], Introduction.

[47] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p.1.

[48] David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p.4.

[49] Naugle, *Worldview,* p.345.

agenda'.[50] This demonstrates a significant, intra-faith divergence of values that are nevertheless supported by the revealed truth of God's goodness in Christ Jesus to which both theologians profess allegiance.

What unites a community of faith (sacred or secular) is commitment to stories that express its shared ultimate belief in what is good. Richard Norman identifies the need for meaningful narratives as a 'core' human experience, and observes that every culture has 'a repertoire of stories, of archetypal experiences enacted in the lives of individuals'.[51] For contemporary secular culture, these stories include a shifting repertoire of films, television plays and 'soaps' in addition to poetry, novels and other literature. For Christianity, they include the canon of the Bible, supplemented by the literature of the tradition (including, for Methodists, the sermons of John Wesley).

Among the characteristics of stories as conveyors of revealed truth, two are particularly relevant to assessing the truth of values. First, the authority of a story as 'true' derives from the manifestation of a belief in the life of the community. Hauerwas observes that a truthful telling of the Christian story requires a community that will live the story faithfully: 'We, no less than the first Christians, are the continuation of the truth made possible by God's rule'.[52] For secular television dramas and sacred epistles alike, truthfulness is a function of the extent to which a community adopts the story as *its own* story, so that people's lives are moulded by acting on their values, to conform with the truth on which their values depend. A community makes its stories truthful by being truthful to its stories.

Christians believe that their foundational stories also gain authority by being empirically true, recording events that actually took place. In this they claim an authority that goes beyond that of other cultural, truth-bearing stories (such as television dramas). Nevertheless, that the quality of truthfulness derives *primarily* from the enactment of foundational beliefs in the life of a community is demonstrated by the damage that has been done to the credibility of all denominations by sexual abuse scandals. As Hauerwas

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[50] Alistair McGrath, 'Conclusion', in Stanley N. Gundry, Dennis L. Okholm & Timothy R. Phillips (eds.), *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp.200-209, p.206.
[51] Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience',p.99.
[52] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p.52.

writes, 'A truthful telling of the story cannot be guaranteed by historical investigation…, but by being a certain kind of people who can bear the burden of that story with joy'.[53]

Second, it is a characteristic of stories that they require interpretation. This is apparent in the four-fold Gospel of the New Testament, each of which gives an interpretation of the story of Jesus which is different both from the other Gospels and also from the interpretation of Jesus by the Saducees and Pharisees.[54] That these stories themselves require interpretation is apparent from the profusion of theories of atonement to which they have given rise.[55] It may seem as if the communication of ultimate beliefs through a medium that is prone to multiple and divergent interpretations is so inefficient and contradictory as to be worthless. However, what has characterised the Christian community over two millennia and given it continuity has been commitment, not to particular beliefs (as the vagaries of theology testify) or even to community (as the fractious history the church illustrates) but to the person of Jesus. This person has been accessible through a continuing process of interpretation by means of scripture, reason, tradition and – following Wesley – experience. Faith in the story of Jesus (of which the tradition of the church has become part) has been founded on faith in the person of Jesus.[56] It is this expression of ultimate belief in the form of commitment to a person, known through his stories, that has remained secure, while the necessary process of continuing interpretation has resulted in the ongoing development of contested beliefs and values in new places and new times.

Conclusion

I have argued that both John Wesley and Richard Norman resorted to mere assertion when attempting to justify what they valued in human experience, because they could do no other. Values, which are fundamental to human action, combine mental attitudes that are directed towards the future as well as the present. They claim authority for a vision of the

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[53] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p.52.

[54] Richard N. Soulen, *Sacred Scripture: A Short History of Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.9.

[55] John McIntyre identifies 13 theories in *The Shape of Soteriology* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1992), pp.29-51. To these may be added black, feminist, womanist, non-violent and ecological models that have been developed more recently. See, for example, J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace* (Eugene, IR: Cascade Books, 2011).

[56] Benjamin McCraw argues that faith, even in a secular context such as a patriot's faith in her country, involves a relation to the object of faith as if to a person. McCraw, 'Faith and Trust', p.147.

future on the basis of beliefs regarding what is good, which themselves rely on values to support them. An endless chain of justification will ensue, unless a community can agree on what they believe to be good. Such beliefs may be described as 'ultimate' or 'revealed' to the extent that they are self-evident to a community and are accepted as a matter of faith. These beliefs are communicated within and between generations by means of stories, which are true when they are lived truthfully, informing the lives of those who place their faith in them. Stories require interpretation if they are to be related to lives in a particular context. However, it is commitment to the story, rather than to any particular interpretation of it, that enables a community to respond to change and retain its identity over time.

This account of value provides an answer to the theological question that was posed by Wesley in his sermon on the 'Unity of the Divine Being', and which remains a fundamental question for contemporary theology: what is it that connects the Bible with the experience of life today? Having argued that it is the experience of value that forms this connection, I will conclude by suggesting three possible implications of this analysis for revival, reform and revolution in global Methodism.

First, the role of Methodism today might be to pose the question, 'What do you value?' This is the equivalent of Wesley's question, 'Are you now happy?',[57] for an age in which happiness has become an unquestioned criterion for personal value.[58] The prophetic role of the church is to prompt critical reflection on what it is that makes happiness good to have. This is a question for the *church* to ask because, although every institution in society is concerned with values in one way or another, the church is the only institution devoted to the question of value through its devotion to God. It is a question for the *Methodist* church to ask, because it is consistent with the Methodist tradition of engaging with experience as a medium through which God is known. It is important that the church should *ask* the question, rather than simply asserting its position on the answer, for three reasons. First, attitudes to power have changed such that the church is no longer able to stand on its authority as an institution to assert its position, even if it wanted to. Second, the question of

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[57] John Wesley, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,* 8th edition (London, 1796), available at http://divinityarchive.com/handle/11258/16722 [Accessed 31 July 2018], §42.

[58] For a discussion of happiness as desire satisfaction see Annas, 'Happiness as Achievement', p.46. For a discussion of happiness as it was understood in the Eighteenth Century, see Darrin M. McMahon, 'From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness: 400 BC – AD 1780', *Daedelus*, 133:2 (2004), 5-17.

value creates a context for language about God that might otherwise struggle to find a meaningful frame of reference in people's lives.[59] (This is not to reduce God to a symbol for value, but rather to appreciate value as one aspect of what it means to talk about God.) Third, as a pedagogical approach, asking a question creates an opportunity to build understanding by stimulating enquiry.[60] By asking, 'What do you value?' the Methodist church can initiate a conversation with individuals and communities about what is of importance to them, encouraging them to reflect upon their ultimate beliefs as to what is good.

Second, by raising the question of value, the Methodist church would acknowledge that this is a question of faith that underpins the actions of all humans, irrespective of their declared creedal allegiances. In doing so it would mitigate against special interest groups who claim either to be of 'no faith' or whose isolationist assertion of 'our faith' places them beyond challenge. Wesley recognised that people sought happiness in different places; they valued different things. Among these rivals to God – these idols – he identified five categories: objects of sense, objects of the imagination, objects of pride, the people we love, and religion.[61] Recognising these repositories of value as gods alongside God is to acknowledge a state of henotheism.[62] It is to suggest that all humanity worships one god or another, because humans cannot make decisions without values, and they cannot hold values without faith in an ultimate belief concerning what is good. To ask, 'What do you value?' is therefore not to question 'Do you believe in God?' but to ask, '*Which* god do you worship?'

Third, having invited a conversation about value, and acknowledged that all humans are committed to one god or another, Methodism is able to declare its allegiance to the Trinitarian God of Jesus, the Christ, in the language of values. We value what Jesus valued, and through our ongoing interpretation of the stories that interpreted him, we seek to have within us the mind – and heart – 'that was also in Christ Jesus'.[63] Ours is a faith of action,

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[59] Elaine Graham, *Apologetics without Apology: Speaking of God in a World Troubled by Religion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017)

[60] G. Light & R. Cox, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Practitioner* (London: Paul Chapman, 2001)

[61] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §12-15.

[62] Mark Damen, *History and Civilisation* (Utah: Utah Sate University, 2012), e-book, available at: http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/1320Hist&Civ/chapters/indexchapters.htm [Accessed 31 July 2018], §11.

[63] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §22.

because it is in action that we reveal what it is that we value. Ours is a faith grounded in community, because it is in community that we share our ultimate beliefs. Ours is a faith directed towards the future, because our beliefs justify our pro-attitudes towards the coming kingdom of God. If asked to justify our faith, our response will be, 'let me tell you a story'; because it is in the truths communicated through the stories of the Bible that we find the inspiration to live truthfully.

Finally, an observation on theological method. The analysis of value does not follow Tillich's method of correlation in taking two independent spheres (scripture and experience) and discerning between them a certain structural similarity.[64] Rather, it contends that Christianity is and always has been fundamentally about what we hold to be good, why we believe it to be good, and how the resulting values shape our lives together. It is to maintain that God is good. In the words of John Wesley:

> And see that you begin where God himself begins: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." … From this fountain let every temper, every affection, every passion flow. So shall that "mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Let all your thoughts, words, and actions spring from this![65]

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[64] David R. Merritt, 'Tillich's Method of Correlation', *The Reformed Theological Review*, 12:3 (1962), 65-75, p.68.
[65] Wesley, 'Unity of the Divine Being', §25.

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