

1. INTRODUCTION

The 204th Irish Methodist Conference took place in 1973 in Bangor, Co. Down. I have particular memories of Sunday, 17th June, the final day of that conference, since it was the day of my ordination. It was not easy to make one's way to the church on time because, added to the normal summer Sunday seaside traffic, there was a parade of extreme Protestants led by Rev. Robert Bradford, a minister ordained by our Conference three years earlier. (Robert was later to resign from our ministry rather than confine his ultra-loyalist activities, although he linked up with a section of 'free Methodism' in north America to maintain his title, and secured election to the House of Commons as member of parliament for South Belfast. Tragically he lost his life at the hands of a Provisional I.R.A. assassin in the autumn of 1981.)

At that 1973 Conference those attending were lobbied by his followers and presented with a leaflet containing quotations from Wesley's Journal and his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament in which the Church of Rome was castigated as unscriptural and the Pope identified as 'the man of sin' and 'the son of perdition' (2 Thess. 2, 3) and eighteenth century Rome as the blood-stained 'Babylon' of Revelation (Chaps. 17.6 and 18.24).

To counter this kind of activity and to promote understanding and reconciliation, the Mission Board of our church had that week published a booklet entitled A Better Way for Irish Protestants and Roman Catholics, containing Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic and his sermon on a Catholic Spirit, with an introduction by the then chairman of the Board, Rev. Dr. Eric Gallagher. A frank, if brief look was taken at some of the intemperate things Wesley had said about the Church of Rome and popery and in this respect it was admitted that he was a man of his time. But the eirenical spirit of the two highlighted works was affirmed as the true Wesley. This elicited an even more detailed publication from the pen of Robert Bradford, A Methodist's View of Romanism, which set out to prove that Wesley was unflinchingly hostile and had never a good word to say about Romanism.

These conflicting interpretations of historical events and statements, and they are widely shared and promoted, lie at the heart of the tragic dilemma of Northern Ireland today. It is not my intention here to offer any detailed analysis of the contemporary scene. Ink enough, and to spare, has been spilt on that in the past decade and if you want to take it further may I commend to you a book by two Methodists, ERIC GALLAGHER and STANLEY WORRALL, Christians in Ulster 1968-1980, published a few weeks ago by Oxford University Press. My purpose is to take a brief look at Wesley's mission in Ireland and to see what happened in subsequent generations.

2. BACKGROUND

Compared to the upheavals of the Elizabethan, Jacobite and Cromwellian periods, when the conquest of Ireland by England assumed a markedly religious character, the island to which John Wesley travelled in mid-eighteenth century was a relatively quiet place. The Protestant ascendancy was firmly in control since the triumph of Prince William of Orange over James II - a battle fought out largely on Irish soil. By harsh penal laws Catholics were deprived of all political power and could own no more than a few acres of land. Many of the same laws hit hard at the dissenting Presbyterians, mainly Ulster based, but it was to be the end of the century before reaction to this situation, allied to dissatisfaction among the Anglo-Irish with economic rule and manipulation from London, was to boil up into a rebellion on the scale of, and fuelled by ideas from, France and America.

When Wesley landed in Dublin in August 1747 for the first of his twenty-one visits to Ireland - he subsequently went about every second year spending seven years of his life there, travelling through every county but Kerry in the extreme south-west - he arrived in a city that was shortly to experience the architectural and cultural flowering of the mid-Georgian period. It was a way of life enjoyed by the landed and propertied section of the community, of course, leaving the majority of the people untouched, as comments in Wesley's Journal and from other contemporary writers testify. Grievances over land confiscations, especially by Cromwell, who combined this way of paying off his troops with a militant anti-Catholic spirit, were never far beneath the surface. A native population forced to pay land tithes to an alien Church and rack-rents to frequently absentee landlords, members of that same Anglican establishment, had not far to look for sources of agitation. But potential leadership was either impotent or in exile and the Catholic clergy who were not dispirited were of a more Gallican and liberal outlook than at any subsequent period. On the surface at any rate, the forty years which cover Wesley's ministry in Ireland were among the most peaceful of any in history. It was, however, an age of frequent local riot - when the word 'mob' came into general use - and Wesley encountered his share of them, as much in England as in Ireland.

A flavour of the period can be sensed in some random selections from his Journal for 1758.

Sat. 27 (May - town of Sligo) 'The mob had been in motion all day, but their business was only with the forestallers of the market, who had bought up all the corn far and near to starve the poor, and load a Dutch ship, which lay at the quay; but the mob brought it all out into the market, and sold it for the owners at the common price. And this they did with all the calmness and composure imaginable, and without striking or hurting any one. I preached in the evening, near the main street, to a small, quiet, serious company ...'

Sat. 5 (June) 'I preached at Manilla, a village four miles from Castlebar. I was surprised to find how little the Irish Papists are changed in a hundred years. Most of them retain the same bitterness, yea, and thirst for blood, as ever, and would as freely now cut the throats of all the Protestants as they did in the last century ...'

Fri. 9 (June) 'About eight I preached at Ahaseragh to a congregation of whom about four-fifths were Papists ...'

Sun. 11 (June - Athlone) '... In the afternoon abundance of Papists as well as Protestants were present on the Connaught side of the river while I explained the joy that 'is in heaven over one sinner that repenteth'. Toward the close, two or three eggs were thrown, and, not long after, two stones ...'

(Journal, Vol. IV, 267-269)

Those of you who are American scholars of Wesley will know that in his attitude to the War of Independence he showed himself to be a typical English High Church Tory. Politically his reactions in Ireland were of a similar kind. His comment on the Relief Act of 1778, relaxing the penal laws, was that Catholics could 'give no reasonable security to any Government of their allegiance or peaceable behaviour' (Letters, Vol. VI, 371). 'I wish them well but I dare not trust them' (Disavowal of Persecuting Papists, 1782, Works Vol. X, 175). However, this was kept, by and large, quite separate from the dominant passion of his mission in Ireland, as elsewhere, 'to save souls'. The world was indeed his parish, whether it was his own Anglican world, the Roman Catholic world or

the world of the unchurched. He met opposition and ready listeners in all three.

3. ECUMENIST OR ANTAGONIST?

During his third visit to Ireland in May 1749 he did encounter a mob stirred up by a certain Nicholas Butler, a ballad-singer, in Cork and directed against Methodist worshippers. On his return to Dublin in early July he wrote two open letters:

Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland (6 July 1749)

Letter to a Roman Catholic (18 July 1749)

Both appear to have been occasioned by the 'late occurrences' at Cork. The Address is mainly directed to Protestants, appealing to them to give Methodists the opportunity to prove that they are good citizens - they 'spend and are spent to advance genuine morality' and their values are conducive to 'the flourishing of our manufactures'. The Letter has a stronger doctrinal emphasis and more spiritual tone. It also speaks of 'true Protestants' rather than 'Methodists'.

It has now, of course, become something of a manifesto in the recent years of Methodist/Roman Catholic dialogue, especially through the edition edited by the Dublin Jesuit, Father Michael Hurley, founder of the Irish School of Ecumenics. If it had come out of the modern ecumenical movement or the post-Vatican II situation it would be understandable but against the background sketched in above and the political preconceptions of Wesley himself it is remarkable. As Cardinal Bea, then President of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, said in his preface to Michael Hurley's edition, 'it preaches and practises in the eighteenth century what Christians in the twentieth century have only recently discovered and formulated and what they have yet to succeed in reducing to general practice' (op. cit. 15).

For any who may not be familiar with the text of the Letter let me risk doing violence to it by a brief summary:

The opening sections express the conviction that love is destroyed by listening to stories about each other rather than making contact and seeking ways to fulfil our common humanity under God. The middle part spells out Protestant beliefs and shows that these are firmly based on the historic creeds of the Church together with an emphasis on the universality of the Atonement. 'Is there any one point which you do not believe as well as we?' (Par. 11)

Then comes one of the most argued over sections: 'My dear friend, consider: I am not persuading you to leave or change your religion, but to follow after that fear and love of God without which all religion is vain. I say not a word to you about your opinions or outward manner of worship. But I say, all worship is an abomination to the Lord, unless you worship him in spirit and in truth, with your heart as well as your lips, with your spirit and with your understanding also ...' (Par. 13)

This is followed by a spelling out of Christian love in action and the exhortation 'We ought, without this endless jangling about opinions, to provoke one another to love and to good works. Let the points wherein we differ stand aside: here are enough wherein we agree, enough for the ground of every Christian temper and of every Christian action ... if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike ...' (Par. 16)

The final paragraph is a call to common resolve:

- 1) To avoid hurt by 'every instance of a kind, friendly and Christian behaviour towards each other'

- 2) 'To speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other ...'
- 3) 'To harbour no unkind thought, no unfriendly temper towards each other ...'
- 4) 'Let us, fourthly, endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom ...' (Par. 17)

Two questions come immediately to mind. First, is this the essential Wesley, the true spirit of the man? Second, if it is, can he, as some have tried, be accused of indifference or latitudinarianism? Wesley was a man of his time in his political expressions, as we have noted, but, while he may not have been as unique a figure in sparking off the evangelical revival as Methodist hagiography has sometimes claimed, he was capable of much that was novel and not simply a follower of opinions. Gordon Fupp has stated in his introduction to A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain (Vol. I, XXI) that the eighteenth century was 'sick of religious strife' but the battle lines were still (are still) sharply drawn in Ireland and controversy was not hard to seek. For example, with more asperity than charity, Wesley carried on a correspondence in 1780 in the columns of the Dublin newspaper, Freeman's Journal, with the Capuchin Father O'Leary, about the rights and wrongs of various events in the Reformation, baldly stating at one point that if O'Leary would not accept his interpretation 'a Protestant ought not to trust you any more than he would trust a wild bull' (Letters, Vol. VII, 14). However, on 12 May 1737, on a further visit to Cork 'A gentleman invited me to breakfast with my old antagonist, Father O'Leary. I was not at all displeased at being disappointed. He is not the stiff, queer man that I expected, but of an easy, genteel carriage, and seems not to be wanting either in sense or learning' (Journal, Vol. VII, 274)

John Wesley could be provocative and there were times when his toryism took over, especially when Catholicism seemed to imply any threat to the constitution. But in his more considered writings, including the Letter to a Roman Catholic and his sermon on a Catholic Spirit he comes across as warm-hearted and generous. While we must be critical of him from a modern sociological standpoint, noting the limitations that an individualist pietism imposed, we must marvel too at the breadth of his evangelical commitment. Not even denominational convictions, however strongly held, could be allowed to interfere with the working of the divine spirit in the soul of the individual person. One of the tests of idealism is how one reacts when someone of one's own kith and kin is involved. When Samuel Wesley, younger son of Charles, made known that he had joined the Church of Rome, John wrote to him in these words on 19 August 1784: 'I have often been pained for you, fearing you did not set out the right way: I do not mean with regard to this or that set of opinions, Protestant or Romish (all these I trample under-foot) ... Whether of this Church or that I care not; you may be saved in either, or damned in either: but I fear you are not born again, and except you be born again you cannot see the kingdom of God ...' (Letters Vol. VII, 230-1). Certainly this was the line followed by Wesley's disciples in Ireland in the missionary endeavours of the generation following his death, men like Gideon Ouseley, Charles Graham and Fossey Tackaberry. They steered clear, as far as possible, of religious controversy in their concern to bring salvation and biblical teaching to the individual of whatever denomination or none.

Again, in his letter to his nephew, as earlier, we have encountered the dismissive use of 'opinions'. Is Wesley open to accusations of that kind of false bonhomie that is sometimes levelled at the ecumenical movement today? Not on any straightforward reading of the sermon Catholic Spirit. 'If thine heart is as my heart ...

give me thine hand' is not to be taken to mean that the waverer between two opinions or the person whose 'mind is all in a mist' for lack of 'settled, consistent principles', but is 'for jumbling all opinions together' can claim to be a person of a catholic spirit. 'Be convinced, that you have quite missed your way ... Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ ...' One needs religious principles and the nurture of 'one particular congregation' but the aim is universal love and 'he that has this is of a catholic spirit'. So surely Albert Outler is right to have found it 'mildly outrageous' that Wesley should have become 'the patron saint of theological indifferentism' (A.C. OUTLER, ed. John Wesley, OUP, 1964, 28).

An ambivalence remains, however, which can only be understood in the light of the fact that Wesley never had any pretensions to be a classical theologian nor the founder of a church. He was leader of a spiritual movement and as such drank freely at the wells of seventeenth and eighteenth spirituality which for him transcended denominational frontiers. As Jean Orcibal of the Sorbonne has written, 'totally opposed to religious indifference, he was the exponent of a toleration which was mystical rather than doctrinal' (A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, ed. by R. Davies & G. Rupp, Vol. I, 110).

4. CONTROVERSY RENEWED

Sadly, within a generation of Wesley's death the whole scene had changed. The measure of toleration which lingered on for two decades of the nineteenth century disappeared under the threat imposed by a rapidly rising Catholic population seeking, and in 1829 achieving, a measure of emancipation and continuing to pressurise the Protestant ascendancy. At the same time there was a hardening of spirit among the Evangelicals of the Established Church which began to show itself in a militant anti-Catholicism. The Anglican Church has been said to combine a calvinistic creed, a popish liturgy and an Arminian clergy. For various reasons the Irish wing, the Church of Ireland, retained a much more calvinist outlook influenced by Puritan settlers and soldiers who remained in the seventeenth century and successive waves of Huguenot refugees from France, many of whose descendants became clergymen while retaining fervent memories of persecution by Catholics. A similar apologetic to that put forward by the Dutch Reformed Church for the system of apartheid in South Africa can be traced in Irish religious history - in the endorsement of the right of the elect minority of Protestant ascendancy to govern the ignorant masses by such means as penal laws and in what has come to be described as the 'British Protestant myth' - an interpretation of Irish history as a struggle between light and darkness, the light of a British Protestant civilization which its Irish representatives have been willing to confer upon a degraded people blinded by false religion. Allied to this there was the rise of a millenarian movement in the 1820s and 30s which, concerned with thoughts of an imminent Second Coming, desired to be found at good works such as freeing Irish Roman Catholics from bondage to antichrist.

Many such clergy were homegrown, some former Roman Catholics displaying all the fanaticism of converts, but the most militant of all came from England where their spiritual home was Exeter Hall the headquarters of a revived Protestant Association. Responding to a rallying call for a campaign against popery, especially Irish popery, Rev. Alexander Dallas became the founder and director - one could say dictator - of the Society for Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics. A former soldier and lover of Empire, Dallas has been described as a man with a messianic complex. His God 'at times, seemed very much like a heavenly field-marshal who summoned and directed an army of British churchmen, led by reformed and Evangelical bishops and priests, in a great battle against the principalities and powers of this world' (D. BOWEN, The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70, Dublin 1978, 211). Ultimately this campaign was a miserable failure although it left a bitter legacy. It lacked understanding of the Irish people and true compassion for their needs. Everything, charitable work

and education included, was subsidiary to proselytising opportunities. The Great Famine of the late 1840s was seen as a divine opportunity which 'loosened the chains of priestly bondage' rather than a human tragedy which deprived the country of two million souls through death and emigration and as many again in the following decades.

While only a minority of Irish Anglicans actively supported these methods, from the 1820s on there was a sizeable body of the Church of Ireland prepared to go on to the attack against a possible Roman Catholic ascendancy in order to protect their own privileged position. These were the years of a rising Ultramontanistism in the Catholic Church and the conflict probably hastened its ultimate triumph, cemented in the arrival in 1850 of Paul Cullen as papal legate and Primate. Between them Dallas and Cullen, as the representative figures of extremity on both flanks, shaped Catholic and Protestant relations for a century following. In the opinion of Bowen, the tragedy of the Irish Evangelicals is that they forgot in the heat of the conflict one of the wisest cautions of Charles Simeon (a man nearer in time and in spirit to Wesley):

'You must not be in bondage to the religious world any more than to the ungodly. True, you are not to keep back the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, but there are different ways of stating them; and you should adopt that which expresses kindness and love, and not that which indicates an unfeeling harshness. Only speak from love to man, and not from fear of man, and God will both accept and prosper you.' (MOULE, Simeon, 185, letter of 7 Dec. 1817 in BOWEN op.cit. 80)

In Ireland, as elsewhere, Wesley sought to counter social evils as well as to evangelise and left a legacy of concern for social welfare, for education and for other charitable work which has been carried on and developed to date in ways that are creditable to a denomination that has never numbered more than a few tens of thousands.

5. TWENTIETH CENTURY

While events in the province of Ulster followed a somewhat separate path to the rest of the island up to the time of the creation of an independent state of Northern Ireland in 1920, due mainly to the presence of a large body of Presbyterians, the Protestants there have maintained a garrison or siege mentality even though having a fairly sizeable majority of numbers. Characteristic of both Protestants and Roman Catholics has been a theological conservatism and puritanism of outlook which have hindered the impact of fresh ideas and exaggerated differences of behaviour in ways not at all conducive to tolerance. This has left each section of the community captive to the political ideologies of their own side. 'There is little convincing evidence that during those fifty years' (1920-70) 'any of the Irish Churches demonstrated much in the way of insight into the social and economic implications of the Gospel... They were relatively unaware of the winds of change that were blowing elsewhere in the world of Christian thought about the role of the Church in society.' (GALLAHGER & WORRALL, op.cit. 203) Going back into the nineteenth century there has been noted a switch of emphasis from the post French revolutionary concern for 'the rights of human beings to rights of the Churches' (LOUIS McREDMOND, Month, Mar. 1976) and the impact of this is still with us. A simple example serves to illustrate these claims. Recently a group of Protestant churchmen, convinced that what Northern Ireland needs is spiritual revival, have been pressing the American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham to conduct a campaign in the province. Dr. Graham, who has become more ecumenical in recent years, has stated that one of his conditions for coming would be that both Catholic and Protestant churches should work together in preparation. It has been found impossible to agree to this, either out of conviction or for fear of the kind of backlash from the reactionary sections of the churches noted above, so there the matter rests.

In what is now the Republic, the Church of Ireland (Anglican), which is the dominant grouping in a Protestant minority of less than five per cent, largely retreated from public life into a near ghetto mentality for several generations after Disestablishment in 1870. Emerging from that now it can still adopt a carping rather than a positive stance on such issues as 'mixed' marriages. One thinks longingly of Wesley's 'come and let us reason together'. Methodists, forming about half of one per cent of the population, have been a little more outgoing and are well respected in those small pockets of residence where they are to be found. Wesley's social concerns have not been lost but developed in such novel ways as the founding of an agricultural training college to help keep Protestant young people on the land - and find marriage partners. Methodists, like others, are still captive, to an extent, to that lingering individualism which implies that political problems can be solved by deeper piety, although less noticeably so than in Northern Ireland. One Dublin layman was recently heard to utter a plea for 'a thoughtful reconciling of the human condition today with the essential elements of Christianity'.

The Irish Catholic Church has taken huge strides since Vatican II and in many respects is the most vital of any today. But it still finds it hard to shake off the shackles of Ultramontanism in such areas as divorce legislation (constitutionally prohibited in the Republic) and pressure for a similar amendment to prohibit abortion. Protestant reluctance to see moral and confessional teaching enacted in law is frequently misinterpreted as vague liberalism. Relationships between the churches are unrecognisable from fifteen years ago although still overshadowed by rigid attitudes on inter-church marriages. Currently it is we Protestants who are most unsure of where we go from here. We have much to learn and relearn from Wesley while making no naive attempt to lift him straight out of one century into another. Certainly, in Cardinal Bea's words, his emphasis on Christian love reminds us that 'we can fail in charity not only by what we do but also by what we omit to do; that the cold remoteness of peaceful coexistence in separation cannot satisfy our calling as Christians'. (Preface to John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic, ed. Hurley 1968, 19)