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Dr. Jorge Pantelís M.
La Paz, Bolivia

THE WESLEYAN TRADITION
WITHIN THE POOR OF LATIN AMERICA

A proposal of a socio-missionary analysis

This essay is only a primary approximation of a theme that is as significant as is the Wesleyan tradition among the poor of Latin America. Here we shall attempt to establish some of the socio-historic parameters as well as the missionary ones in which diverse sectors of the poor and oppressed of Latin America have participated - and are participating- in the Wesleyan tradition of our church. Thus, we propose to establish a historic-missional periodization of the places and moments in which the Wesleyan tradition has been favored in the poor Latinamericans.

From the Colonial Christianity to Liberal Protestantism

This year we recall the 500 years in which Christopher Columbus steps down with a continent completely unknown to the Europeans. With this historical event began the implantation of Christianity by violent means in a continent inhabited by more than fifty million American-indians. The Portuguese and Spanish crowns were able to successfully impose over these people a feudal colonial system that today we are moved to lament instead of celebrate the 500 years of this historic process. The implementation of Catholicism followed, mutatis mutandis, the parameters of the Iberian Christendom of churches captive of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns, whose missionary apparatus was fashioned and adjusted to the colonial interests of the new owners of such a vast continent.

This is how the "Cristiandad de las Indias" was imposed where church and society were fused in a long process of mixing of ethnic, culture and religion. On one side was the official Catholic church and as its counterpart to this there was the popular Catholicism, a religiosity through which the enslaved peoples expressed their identity as the oppressed.

This situation of Colonial Christendom started a breakthrough with the advent of the new independent nations, at the start of the XIX Century. But recently under the Liberal governments at the end of the past century and the start of this one, there entered a crisis with the efforts to modernize the continent and with this to relocate institutionally the Roman Catholic church. As part of this Liberal effort, there was an effort to let in immigrants and Protestant missions, among others, certainly, the North-American Methodism.

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~~This~~ was transplanted to the Latin American world the North-

American denominationalism, fractured and many times very competitive, with a strong missionary spirit of frontier churches, representative of the manifest destiny of the United States. The Liberal project that was proposed was that of "respectable church of the middle class", this is to bring the emerging Latinamerican middle class as its principal missionary effort. At the shadow of this project, at the length and width of the continent their were established first class educational institutions, instruments of the first order for the new middle social classes thirsty for NorthAmerican education. It was thought that by influencing the new emerging classes of the continent there would be help for the poor instead of working directly with them. A type of a trickle down missionary theory, quoting Mr. Reagan.

Methodist Pentecostalism as a religiosity of the oppressed

At the beginning of this century there was in the Methodist Church in Chile one of the first Pentecostal reactions to Protestantism yet strongly foreign. The small Chilean Pentecostal branch was expelled from the official Methodist Church, and since then the Chilean Pentecostal movement has grown to the point of actually being a force of a million and a half adherents, constituting 15% of Chile, half of which are Pentecostal Methodists. The episcopacy and itinerary ministry system has been maintained and various other aspects of the Wesley inheritance. This is precisely one of the camps that is awaiting an adequate investigation that will let us better understand how our Wesleyan inheritance is alive and strong - may be sincretic and certainly, Latinamericanized - in an autoctonous church of the poor, with an enormous missionary hability unlike any other in the continent.

In Latin America there is no other religious movement that has been studied - and feared more by the established churches - than Pentecostalism. In the midst of the final crumbling of the Catholic Christendom (in spite of its renewed efforts to establish a new christendom project) and the missionary inoperability of the middle class Protestant Churches, Pentecostalism is growing with an unprecedented vitality never before seen, consisting in actuality more than forty million followers in Latin America. There have been proposed many explanations for this religious phenomenon. Without a doubt the growing poverty in the continent, and above all the lack of pastoral attention of the established churches are among the many important causes. Be it as it may, the present Pentecostalism, divided in innumerable groups, represents the Protestant version of popular religiosity, paralel to the popular Catholicism from where it continuos to nurture. This popular religiosity for the past 500 years has served to give expression of identity to the poor and oppressed of Latin American in a sincretic or/and juxtaposition with original religion of the Amer-Indians and Afro-latin-americans and subsequently with the entire mass of Latinamericans mestizos, also poor and oppressed. This is the social-religious context of the Chilean Pentecostal Methodism that today has extended to various other countries, including the United States.

Almost like an irony, we can say that while many of the middle class christians, including parts of the ecclesiastic hierarchy have expressed a solidarity called "prepheralial option for the poor"; and, we have here in [^] America the poor making their option for the Pentecostalism.

The Wesleyan Tradition in the Church of the Poor

Precisely this ecclesial expression recently mentioned in another area where we find in various forms a Wesleyan tradition among the poor in Latin America. Without a doubt, the political-ecclesial movement known as "theology of liberation", the popular church or the church of the poor, constitutes in what has been 500 years of church experience in Latin America, the christian spirituality which in a prophetic way has Latinamericanized those that have lived the christian faith, fighting for the liberation of the poor people, marginal and dependent on the economic and political system.

The last twenty five to thirty years in Latin America, has constituted a particular historical situation for the unfolding of this Christian spirituality for liberation. The frustration in the popular movements in our nations was drowned and violently controlled by successive newly formed military regimes; masquerading as an ideology for national security. This was happening at the same time as significant christian sectors of the middle class and part of the church hierarchy, under the new pastoral winds of the II Vatican Council in the Catholic case, were beginning to articulate numerous attempts to accompany the hopes and struggles of the poor. With our countries occupied militarily by our own armies, without possibilities of political or social expression, the churches - particularly the Roman Catholic church - were the only avenue left for the popular expression. In this manner the poor that in Latin America had been incorporated into the church as a popular passive religion, suddenly irrupted with a new face in the center of the churches; this time as the protagonic subjects that brought justice and new direction to the now established churches.

Various important segments of our Methodist churches are today part of this movement. We have all contribute to this process with our persecuted, exiled and martyrs. To this end to understand the christian faith on behalf of the poor there have been efforts to go back to the Wesleyan inheritance. In these efforts we can cite the works of José Míguez ~~Bonino~~ on sanctification, the "Wesley of the Poor" by Elsa Tamez, and various other works, specially by the Brazilian Methodists. In this there is no systematic or continued efforts. Barely a few, but significant efforts to accomodate our rich Wesleyan inheritance in an expression of such evangelistic and prophetic potential. On the other side, an evaluation that this process has on our ministry, the church order and our doctrinal emphasis. This is a work yet to be done.

The Wesleyan Tradition among Methodist Amer-Indians

The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia and more recently in Perú offer us situations without parallel in the continent on the theme that we are exploring here. On both cases the churches are under the control and the direction of the Aymara and Quechua Methodists, two of the oldest native Amer-indians of what is now Latin America.

The Bolivian case is particularly dramatic and we shall refer to it with some detail.

At the end of the decade of the fifties, Bolivia was declared by the Methodist Church of the United States, as "Land of Decision". With this came a new missionary Methodist start in Bolivia. Hundreds of Northamerican missionaries and millions of dollars were diverted specially to the new tropical colonized zones of the country. In spite of this, ~~after~~ two decades of this missionary effort (in which in great part it helped hold back the "communist menace" in Bolivia because of the popular mobilization of the national revolution in 1952. A typical attitude of the "cold war" era). The Methodist members grew where least expected at the Bolivian Altiplano with the Aymaras of Lake Titicaca. Obviously a clear "jock" of the Spirit who not always ~~follows~~ ^{blows} where our best missionary efforts are centered.

By the middle seventies, the Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia, was autonomous of the Northamerican mother church, more in name than in reality. In Bolivia at that time we were living under one of the strongest military regimes of this century. Years of repression, torture and exile even for the Evangelical Bolivian Methodist Church with a clear prophetic position in the country. In the midst of all this the Methodist Aymara majority, well supported by a leadership forged by a growing aspiration ^{of revindication} and ~~reindication~~ and justice for the original people of America, it found in the IEMB a space - though limited and with all the contradictions proper to a church - to give historical expression to a ethnic-national hope.

In 1976 they gained total control of the Church. The Bishop was forced to resign and abandon the country and with him the last group of Northamerican missionaries that were left. There was established a transitional government for two years without a Bishop. Then little by little, then has been institutionalized in some aspects this irruption Aymara in the Evangelical Methodist Bolivian Church, with much conflict but with an ethnic-cultural authenticity without precedent. Never has the IEMB been as Bolivian as today. A strong lay movement and a clear conscience to articulate a living of the christian faith with the real community and ethnic people like the Aymaras, are the most important components of this church reality.

Without a doubt, only in a church like our, with such a rich structural and connectional heritage and a vocation for service, in the Bolivian scene it has been possible for the poor Aymaras, also later the Quechuas; found in the Evangelical Methodist Bolivian Church a place for a historical revindication.

Other protestant churches in the country, in place of gathering at its fold all the ethnic and social groups has opted to divide according to social classes and ethnic groups of the country. This experience of church for the poor is relatively recent, there is yet a way to be found to express the unity of the church in behalf of each one of each of the ethnic and social groups that comprise the country of Bolivia, considering the gifts and graces ^{by the Spirit} that generously has been bestowed to each group for the good of all the church.

As we have indicated before, in these last years in the Peruvian Methodism there is a indigenous movement like the Bolivian. In this case the Quechua are the protagonist of this process. ~~Only recently are we~~ ^{we are} at the beginning of this religious movement, there is ^{very} still more historical time to be able to fully appreciate the movement. However, here again, we see the poor not only as objects of Christian charity, but the Church itself, and, in both cases, Bolivian and Peruvian, within a Wesleyan tradition.

There are left in the inkwell many other episodios and situations where our Wesleyan heritage has been - or is - present in the midst of the poor of Latin America. In this essay we barely mention a few: How the Wesleyan tradition was present in the Mexican revolution at the beginning of this century, in the North-east of Brazil, among the Mapuches in Chile, among the Tobas in Argentina, in the socialist Cuba and in ~~the~~ Central America transformed by the civil wars and popular mobilization.