BOWEN

... TO SAVE OUR OWN SOULS

The Dynamics of Reciprocal Mission in the World Parish

by Starr Bowen

To attempt to understand the social priniciples of John Wesley, as a missiological mandate, is more complex than the task appears. Neither theology, sociology, nor history will facilitate the project alone. More relevant are aspects of Wesleyan "experience", suspicious of any extant interpretation. And where "experience" leaves off... crude, unacademic, intuitional "art" begins.

I. The Christ of Havana

A visitor to Cuba may easily miss the 100 foot high sculpture of Christ blessing Havana. It stands on a high bluff adjacent to the three forts guarding the entrance to the natural harbor. To reach it, you must take a ferry to Casa Blanca, the little village across the inlet from Old Havana, then climb past the old bomb shelters honeycombing the hillside and undermining the base of the statue.

I lived in Cuba two years before I realized that the figure across the harbor was, indeed, of Christ. I once asked a tour guide about it. He thought it was "some saint of Batista's". In fact, the sculpture was commissioned by Batista's wife, after a contest won by a young Cuban sculptress. Working in Italy, Vilma Madera built the sculpture from huge blocks of Italian marble. Like the Statue of Liberty, it was shipped from Europe and reassembled where it stands today. But unlike other works of religious art in Cuba, harking back to the first years of the European conquest of America, this image is new. Erected in 1958, it was completed only weeks before the triumph of the Cuban revolution.

Faith, art, and history sometimes come together in surprising ways. Where old faith fails and history must be rewritten by new historical subjects, art can either depict the futility of the past or point the way to a new future and a better faith.

Could it be that the evangelization of Cuba could only really begin when its unsubtle exploitation by foreign interests ceased? Perhaps, in spite of the enthusiasm of missionaries, only an artist could sense the imminent evangelical *kairos* for Cuba. Some say that only when a nation assumes responsibility for its own history, is its salvation possible. Only when colonial interests ceased to dominate the populace could the social principles of Christianity finally come to Cuba. And when the missionaries left in opposition, the Christ of the socialist revolution remained.

Perhaps it is no accident that the Methodist Church of Cuba is the largest and fastest growing Protestant denomination in the country. When the church lost its foreign missionaries and most of its national clergy, it had to re-invent itself as a *movement* of lay preachers and committed Christians determined to keep churches open in spite of many hardships. Although the negative attitudes of hierarchies in opposition to the revolution invoked stringent reactions from the government, there were many implicit principles of Christianity in the new socialist structure. Many of these principles had been long-advocated even by the missionaries, and were embraced by many Christians who actively supported the revolution. For example, the immediate disappearance of casino gambling, prostitution, and subtle forms of slavery were applauded by Christians of conscience throughout the country. Even though the expropriation of international businesses was controversial, the principles of agrarian reform and employment (which the expropriation made possible) had long been Christian concerns.

Fidel Castro said the Cuban revolution was built upon the principles of Christianity, without the hierarchy. Indeed, his education in Jesuit schools is a fair testimony to back his assertion. When the revolution embraced the priorities of equitable education and health care for all, it was as if the concerns and investments of missionaries had suddenly attained a 'new birth' in the domestic policy of the supposedly atheistic leaders. Still, churches were shocked when

their schools and non-sacred properties were confiscated and put to secular service. Yet some church people were relieved when their buildings could provide the basis for equal access to education for all, funded by the state.

Since most Methodist missions in Latin America began, or were closely allied with, educational programs, Methodists may consider their mission a success when a government finally takes responsibility for the literacy and further education of the people. Similarly, if a government will acknowledge its task of providing equitable health care to the poor, many Methodist clinics and hospitals could consider themselves redundant.

Today Cuba has nearly 100% literacy and a surplus of teachers. It has the most effective distribution of health care in the hemisphere, with longevity and infant mortality rates rivalling many First World countries. A surplus of medical personnel now serves in mission to third- world countries. Added to the realized priorities in education and health care, the last 38 years have seen significant achievements in the areas of land reform, employment, equitable housing, cultural solidarity, racial integration, minimium basic food distribution for all, as well as the rights of women, children, and the elderly. The virtual realization of an equitable, if not quite classless, society in Cuba is hardly incompatible with the social vision espoused by Jesus' proclamation of God's reign and the contextual experiment of the church of Pentecost (Acts 2:40 ff.) The irony is that such achievements have been supervised by leaders who were officially atheists, suspicious of the churches' agenda and alliances. Yet the moral and social principles consistently endorsed and actively realized by the Cuban revolution, despite some exceptions, lead us to consider the Cuban process of social transformation to be, potentially, in many respects, one of the most concretely *Christian* revolutions in history.

Cuba may also constitute, in many critical respects, the most thoroughly developed *Wesleyan* social structure touched by the history of Methodist missions. Of course, it is still going on to perfection. But whatever the future of Cuba, the

development of Cuban socialism already illustrates the possibility of a *nation reformed* along the egalitarian lines which inspired the first Methodist societies, consistently preached and practiced by John and Charles Wesley. Now the Wesleyan and Christian churches are challenged to re-identifiy their own ideals as incorporated into one small country's constitution and ethos. While Christian missions (beginning with Bartolome de las Casas in 1514) undoubtedly influenced the high ideals of Cuban socialism (beginning with Jose Marti in 1868), now the Church should reclaim the vision of her youth engendered in her 'illegitimate' lost child. The ideals of the Cuban revolution beckon churches to 'inculturate' in theology and practice, the egalitarian vision of Pentecost as no mere Utopia, but a social reality possible in history, opposed to those who, by greed, power, and deceit, still propose to take God's Reign captive. But Cuba is perceived as the "Ishmael" of Christendom: a heathen child with frightening habits.

II Learning the Gospel from the Heathen

John and Charles Wesley's repeated intent, "to save their souls" sounds pietistic and self-interested ring today. It is hard to appreciate, now, the intense cultural critique which such an intention enshrined for the Wesleys and the first 'methodists' of the Oxford "Holy Club". To us, the desire to save our own souls reeks of individualistic salvation, typical of the cheap-grace appeals of modern televangelists, devoid of social responsibility. But a privatized salvation hardly fits the Wesleys' socially-conscious gospel, concretely communal in so many creative ways. Nevertheless, the dignity, freedom, moral authority, sanctification, and holistic salvation of the individual were always, for the Wesleys, very important.

The worth of a human being as an end in himself was a Christian principle worth defending and promoting with John Wesley's last breath. His last letter to Wilberforce urging the cessation of the British slave trade illustrates the kind of individual salvation with which Wesley was always concerned -- a salvation

beginning with freedom from slavery to other people's sins, beginning in this life. Only by surviving the sins of others could the individual move on to conquer his or her own fears and temptations. The hope of personal sanctification is always dependent on a person's literal and social survival. Social and personal salvation are generally intimate and inseparable in the Wesleyan tradition.

The Oxford Holy Club's invitation to "those who desired to save their souls" was based on the conviction that civilized society as manifested in the mercantile culture of the eighteenth-century ruling classes could *not* save them. Nor could the pretense of religion interpreted through the lens of the English elites offer security of salvation enjoined by the challenge of Scripture (cf. Mt. 25:16-31). Already the early Methodists were taking seriously the social demand of the gospel, to the extent that the hungry must be fed, the naked clothed, and the prisoners attended with compassion and justice. Wesley's sermon, "The One Thing Needful" (1734) beckoned an experience of regeneration whereby the 'ordinary' Christian would be empowered to imitate Christ, not culture, in relationships with others.[1] It is important to note that even in Oxford, the early Methodist perception of salvation and sanctification had broad social parameters, moving well beyond the common constraints of personal piety. The Wesleys were already committing the 'heresy' that the locus of salvation was not to be found either in the established economic order, nor in the religion which it manifested and manipulated.

The Wesleys' pilgrimage to America was no impulsive venture. Their father Samuel was one of the founders of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel which sponsored the Wesleys' mission to Georgia. Whether by design or coincidence, their missiological vision, based upon the imitation of Christ and the Great Commandment, follows closely the work of Bartolome de las Casas in *The Only Way to Bring all People to a Living Faith (1534).* The emphasis upon a

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[1] cf. Richard Heitzenrater, "The Imitatio Christi and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor", in Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition,* Abingdon, Nashville, 1995; p. 59

Christ-like witness as the essential evangelical method characterizes the Wesleys and the great Bishop of Chiapas. It is likely that the Wesley household benefitted from Las Casa's publications, since John Wesley credits Las Casas for trying to stop slavery in the Americas.[2]

The mission to Georgia was derived from experience and frustration in Oxford, as well as Samuel's death and Susana's blessing. The Wesleys' frustration with cultural Christianity in Britain led them to seek a simpler form of communitarian faith, which they imagined might be forthcoming as missionaries to the Indians of Georgia. John's *Journal* notes that their intention was "to save our souls; to live wholly to the glory of God".[3]

The continuity with Oxford subsequently has a different flavor: Wesley intends to "learn the true sense of the gospel" by subjecting his preaching to "the heathen". In a letter to John Burton, one of the Georgia Trustees, he asserts:

> My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen. They have no comments to construe away the text; no vain philosophy to corrupt it; no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounders to soften its unpleasing truths, to reconcile earthly-mindedness and faith, the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. They have no party, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the gospel in its simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God; and consequently they shall know of every doctrine I preach whether it be of God. [4]

Wesley's naive imagination was rather too typical of the newly commissioned missionary, and it was not long before he began to realize that the Indians of Georgia were very unlike "little children, humble, and willing to learn." But Wesley was very attentive and (theoretically at least) willing to learn from them. His first meeting with the Creek headman, Tomochichi, aboard ship upon arrival at Savannah is transcribed in meticulous detail.

> About one, Tomo Chachi [sic], his nephew Thleeanouhee, his wife Sinauky, with two

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2 cf. John Wesley, "Thoughts upon Slavery"(1774) in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley,* 3rd. Edition, ed. Thomas Jackson, London, 1872; Vol.XI, p. 60. It seems that Las Casas had long been an influence on Wesley's thought, but documentation for this assumption requires further research

3 *John Wesley's Journal,* Nehemiah Curnock, ed., Epworth Press, London,1949; p.7, 14 Oct.1735

4 John Wesley, "Letter to John Burton", 10 Oct.1735, in The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, Epworth, London, 1931; I/p.188

> more women, and two or three Indian children, came on board. As soon as we came in, they all rose and shook us by the hand; and Tomo Chachi (one Mrs. Musgrove interpreted) spoke as follows: "I am glad you are come. When I was in England, I desired that some would speakthe great Word to me; and my nation then desired to hear it; but now we are all in confusion. Yet I am glad you are come. I will go up and speak to the wise men of our nation; and I hope they will hear. But we would not be made Christians like the Spanish make Christians; we would be taught before we are baptized."[5]

This last sentence of the chief spoke volumes about the form the European conquest had taken throughout the Americas. Simply, the Indians were baptized by force, then enslaved. It was an offer they couldn't refuse. The confusion to which Tomochichi referred was about a new economic baptism, in which the Indians' only choices were to develop alliances with the French or the English, as both vied for their lands. The civilized tribes around Savannah (Choctaws, Chickasaws, Muskogees (Creeks), and Cherokees farther north) had established social systems which were being devastated by the colonists. Traders were exploiting the Indians and the natural ecological balances of centuries were quickly being upended.

Wesley's report of a conversation with the Choctaw Chief Chicali leaves the impression that he was beginning to appreciate the natural wisdom of the natives.

> After dinner, I asked the greyheaded old man, what he thought he was made for. He said, "He that is above knows what He made us for. We know nothing. We are in the dark. But white men know much. And yet white men build great houses, as if they were to live for ever. But white men cannot live forever. In a little time, white men will be dust as well as I". [6]

John Wesley's *Journal* in Georgia repeatedly intimates his frustration, both at not being able to go to the Indians, and at his inability to understand their way of life. He considered them to be somewhat immoral and lazy. Still, he compared them favorably to the majority of his colonist parishioners in Savannah and Frederica, who were supposed to be Christians. Years later he repeatedly compared the unpretentious rural folk of Wales and Ireland to the American natives, in preference to the pompous churchgoers of England. Fortunately, he had sense enough to patiently await an opportune moment for a ministry among the Native Americans: it

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[5] *Journal,* 14 Feb. 1736

[6] *Journal,* 1 July, 1736

was a moment that never came. (His Moravian friends, however, discerned their moment, and many were martyred.) Deciding to leave Savannah, he reversed his starry-eyed notion of Indians begging to hear the gospel:

> I consulted my friends, whether God did not call me to return to England. The reason for which I left it had now no force; there being no possibility, as yet, of instructing the Indians; neither had I, as yet, found or heard of any Indians on the continent of America, who had the least desire of being instructed.[7]

When Wesley left Georgia he was much less concerned about the conversion of the Native Americans than about the dreadful moral state of the colony, which exploited them at will. He was also still concerned about his own salvation. His apparent depression and self-criticism serves at least as an ironic correction to five hundred years of self-righteous, triumphalist missions among the indigenous people of the Americas. Other missionaries could have benefitted from a dose of Wesley's hard-won humility.

> I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me?.....
> It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity: but what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I the least of all suspected), that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God....[8]

Up to the point when John Wesley left Georgia, in spite of his frustration and failure to convert the Indians, or (thereby?) to find assurance of his own salvation, it is possible to draw some significant missiological conclusions. Some of these are obvious; others require hypothetical insights which beckon further research.

1. The motive of "saving one's soul" by subjecting evangelical preaching to the *response* of indigenous people requires further inquiry. The participation of the evangelized is invaluable for the re-interpretation of authentic salvation and the content of the gospel, appropriate to their context and self-interpreted needs. Expecting God to re-evangelize the preacher through indigenous converts may have dramatic consequences as evangelical "objects" become "subjects".

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[7] *Journal,* 7 Oct. 1737

[8] *Journal,* 24 Feb. 1738

2. Wesley's intention to "learn the true sense of the gospel" through his missionary activity was a great mission motif to the extent that he actually spent time *listening* to the Indians instead of haranguing them. He spent most of his time tending the colonial parish and getting lost in the literal swamps and figurative woods. Although he managed to learn Spanish, German, and Italian, he learned no indigenous language. (A question of priorities, of course!)

3. During the constant conflicts in Georgia, Wesley managed to remain on confidential terms with his Moravian friends and original English colleagues. These gave him good advice which prevented his making matters worse among the Indians. The Moravians were his community, which every missionary requires.

4. He repeatedly understood that the time was not ripe, and *his services required an invitation to work among the Indians.* This was in tremendous preference to the attitude of many other missionaries, to the present day, who impose their colonial gospel without a specific invitation to do so. No one wants to be baptized by force, "as the Spanish make Christians". Here, Wesley follows the advice of Las Casas for effective evangelization by the imitation of Christ. A missionary must be *invited.*

5. Again in the tradition of Las Casas, Wesley gained in Georgia the firm conviction that salvation was open to all humanity of whatever ethnic origin.[9] This perception of universal salvation is tremendously important in the history of missions, and in fact stemmed some of the tide of genocide as later Methodists embraced missions among the Indians and Afro-Americans as a moral alternative to the deathly government policies of exploitation and extermination. Wesley's attempts to instruct slaves and enfold them in the church set a valuable precedent. The "world parish" ideals of inclusive Methodist missions are rooted in Georgia.

6. The question of the Indians' salvation recedes in importance compared to the question of the salvation of the colonists, including Wesley himself. Here we

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[9] *Journal* 20 Oct.1739

must read between the lines. As the sins of the colonists became more apparent, Wesley may have realized that he was "a man of unclean lips, dwelling midst a people of unclean lips." The crisis is implicit: the Indians were more naturally "Christian" than the colonists, and Wesley couldn't divorce himself from the colonists' blatant encroachment on their land and exploitation of their hospitality. Yet he barely addressed the central issue of colonialism, of which he certainly became increasingly aware. As a missiological motif we may conclude: *Mission calls in question the salvation of the missionary and the church which sends him*.

Wesley's learnings as a missionary in Georgia seem to bear much more fruit than is commonly acknowledged. He continued to reflect on his work in Georgia during his subsequent ministry among the indigenous people of Britain. He learned from his mistakes, and used his missional intuition gained in Georgia to inculturate the gospel in British parish contexts, designed "according to need". The cohesive group-influence of the Moravians continued to provide a focus to his ministry, and their successive work with the Native Americans undoubtedly enriched the communitarian aspects of Methodism. Importantly also, his continued interest in indigenous social dynamics lead to bold experiments in Britain as he attempted to apply egalitarian principles to the formation of Methodist societies... *first discerned in practice among the Moravians and native peoples of Georgia!*

III. Elements of Socialism in Methodist Practice

The word "socialism", of course, was unknown to Wesley. Apparently, the term was first used in 1831 by the French Protestant theologian, Alexandre Vinet, in opposition to "individualism" conceived as a social ethic.[10] However, the ideals of socialism, intrinsic to various forms of egalitarian social systems, are as old as the human family. In fact, the family is the essential microcosm from which basic socialist ideals are extrapolated. The extensions of the nuclear family, as a band,

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[10] cf. John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism, An Informal History*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1988 pp.101-110

clan, tribe, village, parish, association, society, etc., necessarily produce the complexity of relationships which challenge the fair distribution of resources. The needs and the means of individuals within a society must be balanced, in some way, for the society to survive.

To make the fair distribution of the total wealth of the society relevant to the genuine needs of each individual becomes an acknowledged priority in a socialist society. This principle is ancient, but finds specific expression in the Christian formation of the church at Pentecost. (Let us cite the passages in the "Authorized Version" read by the early Methodists.)

> And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need (Acts 2:44-45).
>
> And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul, neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common... Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. (Acts 4:32,34-35)

Jennings has documented the extent to which John Wesley incorporated these passages in his writings. We can conclude that the Pentecostal vision of the church was Wesley's guiding light in the formation of the Methodist societies. The societies were to demonstrate the genuine love among Christians which would make Christian missions credible, by living in love and sharing possessions.[11]

John Cort, in his book *Christian Socialism*, criticizes Wesley for his famous advice to Methodists: gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can. Cort thinks Wesley was naive in believing that greedy earners and savers would be constrained to give unselfishly for the benefit of others.[12] But if we take Wesley's own example, we see that giving and sharing are not merely a duty, but also a privilege. Industry and frugality were Methodist virtues, which must necessarily

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11 Theodore Jennings,Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics,* Abingdon, Nashville, 1990 pp.111 ff.

12 John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism, op. cit.* p.17

produce riches and the temptations that accompany them. Only by charitable sharing could these temptations be held at bay, personal economic 'success' justified, and the poor relieved. Viewed in the context of Wesley's other pronouncements on riches, Wesley recommended for the Methodists exactly what he envisioned for the world: a communitarian society not radically different from the egalitarian social systems of the Native Americans, where wealth and property were understood to be at the disposition of the 'extended family' social unit, and to be distributed according to need.

Wesley, in balancing acquisitiveness with giving, was actually taking a standard ethic of the American Indians as a practical mandate of Christian economics. We need only refer to the Bible to find grounds for Wesley's egalitarian principles (cf. I Tim. 6:17-19). Nevertheless the incidental values common to both early Wesleyan societies and most Native American groups beckon further consideration of the direct or indirect influence of indigenous social sytems on Methodist practice and ideals. Could Wesley have learned more of the Christian gospel from the "heathen" than we have so far suspected?

What Cort does not sufficiently appreciate is how Wesley, as well as Adam Smith, Richard Owen, and the early French precursors of socialism, were all engaged in battling the mercantilist domination of the masses, both at home and abroad. Wesley had seen first-hand in Georgia how colonial mercantilism had become an oligarchy of greed, subjecting Christian doctrine to its rule. The evidence was even more abundant in England, as individuals suffered the new slavery brought on by the industrial revolution and enclosures. Although it is as conceivable to link Wesley with the "capitalism" of Adam Smith as with the French socialists, it is important to credit each as alternative thinkers of their time, who saw the truly oppressive forces of colonial mercantilism as genocidal greed licensed by the ruling classes of the sovereign states of Europe.

I, at least, remain convinced that each of the above-mentioned eighteenth

century economists would be as critical of twentieth century economic "globalization" as they were of the mercantile empires of the colonial era. Perhaps the present "neo-liberal, new world order" (now called "totalitarian capitalism" in Latin America), is the child of the exclusive, elitist mercantilist aristocracy rather than of the shop-keeper ethos inspired by Adam Smith's free-market capitalism. (Smith, after all, was a Scottish professor of moral philosophy, and no lover of the English ruling classes).

Wesley, Adam Smith, and Robert Owen, in the face of encroaching domination of the world economy by the mercantile empires and colonial elites, had the good sense to ask themselves a critical question: "What is a market in a civilized world?" Certainly it cannot be a market to which only the rich have access. It cannot be an incessant prize fight between David and Goliath, where David is deprived even of his slingshot. It cannot be a staged performance set by suppliers, where demanders cannot pay even the entrance fee. For Wesley, a market was only incidentally facilitated by money, but manifestly governed by human needs.

The poor of eighteenth century Britain suffered horribly from the licensed greed of the mercantile system, which effectively exploited them, enslaved them, excluded them, and exiled them, even from the church. Wesley's limited solution was to nurture the Methodist societies with a communitarian, self-sufficient spirit grounded on the grace of God. Meanwhile he preached and published against the legal confiscation of property by the rich which turned honest peasants off their lands, then threw them in prison when they could not pay their debts. When the poor could no longer afford flour to make bread, he railed against the distillers for raising the price of grain. He implemented health clinics to stem the abuses of doctors, and published a book on effective home remedies. He valued the ministry and administration of women in the societies, and advocated education for all as a dynamic of the gospel. He battled usury in every form, and considered bankers hardly better than highwaymen. Indeed, he preferred highwaymen, whom he often

visited in prison before their execution by a biased justice system. He helped form credit unions, the precursors of the "building societies" of modern Britain. He was ferocious toward lawyers, critical even of the paper they used, and of a legal system where the poor were sent empty away.

As Jennings concludes, "Wesley supposes that the Methodist movement will not only produce a spread of the gospel throughout the earth but also, and therefore, bring the kind of primitive commun(al)ist society described in Acts 2 and 4."[13]

> The natural, necessary consequence of this will be the same as it was in the beginning of the Christian Church: "None of them will say that aught of the things which he possesses is his own, but they will have all things common. Neither will there be any among them that want: For as many as are possessed of lands or houses will sell them; and distribution will be made to every man, according as he has need." [14]

In Wesley's mind, the Methodists were to be the first fruits of an egalitarian new society where the criteria of ownership and the distribution of wealth would be transformed "according to need" and significant private property would disappear.

The "communist" perception of justice is often defined as "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need". The *socialist* principle was discerned by Marx as "distribution according to one's work" . These notions of justice were certainly not invented by Karl Marx, but stem from the early church (Acts 2) and the writings of St. Paul. Such egalitarian ideals of distributive justice were characteristic of the French and other socialists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who grounded their thought in biblical and Christian images. Before Feuerbach's supposedly 'atheistic' approach, socialist theory was at least nominally Christian. Some, like Vinet and Lamennais, were theologians, who had already met the Methodists. Even Jean Jacque Rousseau, (Wesley's contemporary, and one of the major minds behind the French Revolution), called himself "the only man in France who believes in God". Rousseau's *Social Contract* could hardly have been ignored by Wesley, nor Wesley by Roussea. Wesley still

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[13] Jennings, *Good News to the Poor,* op. cit. , p. 113

[14] J. Wesley, "The General Spread of the Gospel", quoted in Jennings, ibid.

gets occasional credit for helping to avert a bloodbath in England as in France, due to the social influence of Methodism.

Lest we forget, the history of socialist thought is grounded on radical and practical interpretations of Judeo-Christian faith. It is time that the founder of Methodism be credited for many early practical theories which came to inform the development of socialist ideas. The cover-up has lasted long enough. Wesley was one of the fathers of modern socialist ideals, whose many practical experiments and ideas served the later purposes of thinkers like Saint-Simon, Lamennais, Marx, Marti, Miterrand, and Castro.

One of many socialist controversies arose in 1825 following the publication of Henri de Saint-Simon's book *The New Christianity* . Some socialists advocated the distribution of wealth according to each person's *work,* while others professed the principle, "according to *need*" (Acts 2,4). Both principles may be traced to the New Testament church (cf. I Tim. 5:8;). (St. Paul ruled that those who would not work should not participate in common meals.)

Years before the French socialist theories and controversies which occupied the Paris communes, workers' *associations*, and the Revolution of 1848, Wesley had already taken his stand. Both *work* and *needs* were criteria of distribution in a responsible society. In 1741 Wesley was already organizing collectives.

> I reminded the United Society, that many of our brethren and sisters had not needful food; many were destituteof convenient clothing; many were out of business, and that without their own fault; and many sick and ready to perish; that I had done what in me lay to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to employ the poor, and to visit the sick; but was not, alone, suffiecient for these things; and therefore desired all whose hearts were as my heart - -
> 1. To bring what clothes each could spare, to be distributed among those that wanted most.
> 2. To give weekly a penny or what they could afford, for the relief of the poor and sick...[15]

The perpetual project of*organizing* care for the poor deserves credit in its own right as an aspect of discipleship, prior to the attribution of political ideology which Wesley predates. "What we are looking for," says Jennings, "is not Wesley's advice about capitalism and socialism as opposing secular systems of economic

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[15] *Journal,* 7 May 1741

life, but for Wesley's attempt as a practical theologian to develop an understanding and practice of economics based on the same theological principles that govern his reflection on the Christian life generally." [16]

The knitting cooperative, like many other Wesleyan iniatives, bears a way of thinking which would be identified with both communism and socialism. For Wesley, such novel ideas were expressions of Scriptural Holiness and practical stewardship. Both the "employment of the poor" and the perception of distributive justice "according to need" are (typically) present in Wesley's cooperatives.

> My design, I told them, is to employ, for the present, all the women who are out of business, and desire it, in knitting. To these we will first give the common priceor what they do; and then add, according as they need. [17]

Wesley's interest in cooperative associations can be seen, like the Pentecostal community, as one more creative project born of necessity and doomed to fail as a social paradigm. [18] Still, conscientious Methodists have often opted for the greater social implications latent in the early societies. To seriously "reform the nation" required the optimistic belief that, with grace and perseverance, what works in microcosm may also work in macrocosm. Wesley's standard is still not out of date. The women deemed "out of business" were first *employed*, then subsidized "*according as any had need*". Work and compassion must be creatively combined to preserve individual integrity and the demands of social justice in a broad economy. This seems to be the nutshell of early Methodist "socialist" experiments.

We can choose to relegate Wesley's social and economic creativity to negligible or self-interested groping in a darkly threatening milieu. This is the option of those who interpret Wesleyan precepts of charity as primarily or exclusively destined for the dues- paying, deserving poor of the Methodist societies. If so, Methodism probably would have sunk in a malaise of self-service and self-interest. If the non-Methodist poor of Britain did not have access to Methodist charity and reforms, such a strategy would negate the macrocosmic

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16 Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, op. cit. p.97

17 *Journal*, May 7, 1741

18 cf. J. Wesley, " The Mystery of Iniquity", quoted in Jennings, op. cit. p. 112

Methodist charity and reforms, such a strategy would negate the macrocosmic mission entailed in the microcosmic social stucture of Methodism, which Wesley believed could be his archimedian principle to move the world. If the Wesleyan societies could engender macrocosmic justice through the example of microcosmic solidarity, the salvation of the "world parish" seemed possible.

Wesley's 1740 winter collection *from* Methodists and distribution *to* the unemployed poor in Bristol illustrates the spirit of "mercy required by justice", typical of Wesley's 'socialist' principles transferrable to the general public welfare. We can be certain that all who received Methodist charity were not Methodists.

> In the evening, I made a collection in our congregation for the relief of the poor, without Lawford's gate, who, having no work, (because of the severe frost), and no asistance from the parish wherein they lived, were reduced to the last exptremity. I made another collection on Thursday, and a third on Sunday; by which we were enabled to feed a hundred, sometimes a hundred and fifty, a day, of those whom we found to need it most. [19]

We latter day Methodists tend to retain such gestures within the bounds of Christian charity and the administration of the church. But this is to trivialize our founder's reforming efforts and intentions. I believe there is indeed a link between the methodical works of compassion recorded by Wesley, and the vision of a world, beginning in Bristol, where justice and mercy become generally accessible " to those whom we find to need it most." This possibility, available through grace and hard work to whole nations, informed the macrocosmic vision of John Wesley entailed in the microcosmic practice of Methodism. We need not be scandalized if world parish salvation happens to be "socialist" in character.

IV. To Reform the Nations

Through the development of the Wesleyan societies the responsibilities of stewardship displace the ambitions of ownership, to a point where property becomes a threat to the salvation of the owner. Wesley's 1747 charge to his 'stewards' are still viable admonitions to all serious Methodists.

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[19] *Journal,* 21 Jan., 1740

> If you cannot relieve, do not grieve the poor; give them soft words, if nothing else: abstain from either sour looks or harsh words. Let them be glad to come, even though they should go empty away. Put yourself in the place of every poor man: and deal with him as you would God should deal with you." [20]

Does an authentically Wesleyan sense of stewardship, effectively applying the golden rule to the poor, entail merely a change in spiritual habits to bring poor people back to affluent Methodist churches? Is this stewardship a kind of romantic post-modern spirituality which in fact changes nothing? Or is this stewardship a risky intentional change in economic and political philosophy, seeking to mold a social structure which will no longer "grieve the poor" of the world parish? Obviously, the only Wesleyan alternative is that which conceives the salvation of social structures as well as of individuals. As Wesley repeatedly advised affluent Methodists, one's own property is nothing else than a loan from God. The American Indians were right all along: The earth is the Lord's; only God can own property. [21] What we own above that required to provide for our own needs is for the proper relief of the poor, who are always with us. Call it socialist if you will, it's a solid principle of Methodism.

In this paper we have barely touched upon the Native American social ethos which attracted Wesley to Georgia. It was an alternative social vision which Wesley hoped to experience by living among the Native Americans, the substance of which he had already adopted from the communitarian faith of the Pentecostal church and begun to practice in Oxford.

> The same faithfulness I hope to show, through His grace, in dispensing the rest of my Master's goods, if it please him to send me to those [Native Americans] who, like his first followers, have all things common. What a guard is here against that root of evil, the love of money, and all the vile attractions that spring from it! One in this glorious state, and perhaps none but he, may see the height and depth of the privilege of the first Christians, "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things." [22]

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[20] *Journal,* 4 June, 1747

[21] cf. "Sermon on the Mount", Discourse VIII, in Jennings, *Good News to the Poor,* op. cit. p.110

[22] J. Wesley, "Letter to a Friend", 10. Oct. 1735, in Jennings, op. cit. p. 113

Indigenous social alternatives, directly or indirectly, continued to shape Wesley's thinking thoughout his ministry. We must thank the Moravians for the continued interest in learning from the Native Americans which brought about the first American Indian missions by Methodists in their own right. The many indigenous churchesin the Methodist movement continue today to interpolate traditional social alternatives aligned with contemporary Christian witness.

For many years in North America, the term "mission" in Methodist circles implied specific work among native Americans. From these experiences focussing upon education and agriculture, Methodist missionaries were sent out to the rest of the world with confidence. But the question must be asked, whether the missionaries were able to learn as much from the Iroquois, Creeks, Cherokees, and other nations as they should have. Now, it seems, we are only beginning to ask the theological, social, economic, and ecological questions of the Indians which should have occurred to us at least two centuries ago. Their witness to us was always important; now it has become critical for the survival of the planet. If we had taken Wesley's missiological precedent seriously we should have been as concerned with our own salvation as with theirs.

It is well known that the Iroquois Confederacy contributed the basic democratic principles adapted by Franklin and Jefferson in the Articles of Confederation, the precursor of the USA Constitution. It is not so well known that the final thrust of Karl Marx's research in the 1880's was focussed on the social relationships and governing principles of the Iroquois and other American Indian nations.[23] For Marx, the Iroquois had demonstrated the historical possibility of differing social groups managing their joint affairs without a controlling ruler or standing army, enjoying the benefits of wise distribution in a need-based economy, without recourse to money or significant private property. The elements of this

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[23] cf. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, in light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan ;* London, 1884

"primitive" democratic socialism informed Marx's ideal of communism. [24]

The ideals of the American, Mexican, Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan revolutions may be understood only with reference to American indigenous social principles which talented leaders have tried to make practical in different cultures. Unfortunately, the integrity of these revolutions has been severely attacked by domestic and foreign greed, corruption, and self-interest. Only in the case of Cuba is the 38 year revolution still conceivably viable in terms of its original principles. But just barely. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, Cuba's chances of survival were slim and none. The fact that it still survives is a tribute to tremendous creativity and compromise. Yet the necessary compromises with "totalitarian capitalism" threaten the character of the revolution from the underside. How many Cuban "socialist achievements" will survive the economic storm of the century?

Still, the ominous motto of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara is written large all over that island microcosm of planet earth: "Socialism or Death!" Now, in the face of world neo-liberal economic "globalization" and "totalitarian capitalism", the Cuban motto may serve as a prophetic question for the nations. It also represents a moral challenge of ecology and stewardship for the Christian church, enshrined in the alternative social legacy of indigenous Americans, interpreted through John Wesley, and his "world parish" doctrine of practical salvation.

Socialism...or Death?

In conclusion, the question begs four tactics to be adopted by Methodists who are serious about taking their own tradition seriously. We remember that the social and ecological salvation needed by the earth in the next century requires at least as much *art,* as scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We need aesthetic eyes to see the Christ of Havana, Bejing, Congo, and Chiapas... the eyes of an artist who can turn imagination into social sculpture.

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[24] cf. Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers, How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World,* Fawcett/ Colombine, 1988 ; pp. 161 ff.

With courage we can reclaim the Christian basis of socialism, perceived as a realizable economic structure for the world parish and the global village. We can identify John Wesley as one of the most consistent thinkers and founders of socialist ideas practically conceived for the Methodist microsm of the18th century but seeking to establish a paradigm for a macrocosm to the ends of the earth. We can re-establish solidarity and learning connections reciprocally with surviving indigenous groups, who still offer invaluable alternatives for communitarian social life and economics. Wherever egalitarian alternative social structures, like Cuba's, continue to exist, they must be supported, saved, and encouraged. Their extinction constitutes the loss of practical human administrative experience which is precious to the future of the earth. Finally, we must take seriously Wesley's humility in mission, never thinking our own salvation is secured, but humbly seeking to know what new thing God may be doing among the meek of the world parish.