

World Methodist Theology?

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In 2007 the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies will be celebrating its jubilee. Its first meeting was the brainchild of the British minister, Rex Kissack, by then stationed in Rome, and the American Dow Kirkpatrick, at the time minister of St Mark Methodist Church Atlanta, Georgia. They had met in Oxford in 1946 when Kirkpatrick was a visiting scholar and they had recognised the need for a forum in which Methodist scholars and pastors from around the world could exchange views. After protracted negotiations the Institute finally came to birth in 1958 in a ten-day residential meeting at Lincoln College Oxford of a hundred men and eight women, mostly presbyters or probationers, predominantly from Britain and the US, with fifteen from continental Europe, four from Ireland, and ten to represent between them the rest of the world. Since then the Institute has continued to meet under the auspices of the World Methodist Council every three or four years, since 1977 every five, and has expanded its membership to over two hundred, with a better, but still imperfect, balance of gender, country of origin and church affiliation within the broad world Methodist family, with more contributions from lay theologians.¹

The early meetings can be characterised as ‘Methodists discussing theology’, with traditional theological topics, God, Christ, Spirit, Church, being addressed, and little sign of any serious search for a distinctive Methodist slant on such things, although one of the early aims had been to identify a Methodist contribution to the ecumenical movement. With 1977 came a significant change, as the contribution which Methodist tradition might make to the discussion of contemporary issues was seriously considered. Since then the Institute has always concerned itself with the exploration of the Methodist inheritance. It has become a gathering of Methodists discussing *Methodist* theology.

So it is natural to ask, is there, or has there developed from the approximately 163,000 person-hours of conferencing since 1958, a world Methodist theology? Is there a theological standpoint which all share or a body of doctrines to which all subscribe? The obvious place to look for an answer might seem to be the report of the 1987 Institute, entitled *What Should Methodists Teach?* but a glance at the final chapter in which Douglas Meeks sums up the preceding ten days’ discussions reveals an almost total lack of agreement. ‘The final report must be: no earth

shaking consensus, no false sense of unity on the question of Methodist doctrine.’ The only ‘ever so slight’ consensus was, ‘Methodist teaching should be freed from domination, beginning with the teachers.’²

There were, and remain, a number of reasons for that negative outcome. Methodist churches throughout the world are extraordinarily diverse in size, historical origins and current contexts. Some owe their beginnings to a conscious separation from the parent body. The Institute meetings have embraced representatives of the Brethren in Christ, the Church of the Nazarene and other churches which look back to John Wesley but do not call themselves ‘Methodist’. Many churches are the product of missionary and colonial expansion. Some are completely autonomous, but many others are bound together in the United Methodist Church, under the authority of the General Conference meeting in the United States. Since 1784, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was constituted at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, there have been two main streams of Methodist tradition anyway, the British and the American, but all the churches have developed differently in interaction with their environment, and globally the environments are very diverse. For some minority churches the defining questions are ecumenical as they seek to identify themselves in relation to other Christian traditions. For churches in the west the issues have often been those raised by a secular and scientific culture. In countries with dominant other-faith cultures dialogue has been the concern. In Latin America especially the over-riding concern is with poverty and the abuse of power.

So it is understandable that there was strong resistance in 1987 to any suggestion that history, or the current official stance of the churches, should dictate the outcome of theological inquiry, and particularly strong objection to any assumption that the older-established churches in Britain and America should determine for everyone else either the theological agenda or the answers to the questions. Yet all had to acknowledge that they were only closeted together in the same room because they belonged to churches which owed their origin to John Wesley’s eighteenth-century movement and they had come together to explore its theological significance.

In fact there is more to be said. All the churches represented subscribe to the historic faith represented by the Scriptures and the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. All consider themselves to be heirs of the Protestant Reformation. Most include in their authorised doctrinal standards and statements Wesley’s *Forty-four Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament*. Those in the American tradition include the *Twenty-five*

Articles and the *General Rules of the United Societies* as well. Most are members of the World Methodist Council, which now includes in its *Handbook* a Social Affirmation, adopted in 1986, and a statement of 'Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith', adopted in 1996.

There is also the fact that the official ecumenical dialogues in which the World Methodist Council has been engaged, notably since 1966 with the Roman Catholic Church,³ but also with Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, and, still in their early stages, with the Orthodox and the Salvation Army, have apparently not found it difficult to outline a Methodist position on many issues, even if sometimes differences in the Methodist family have had to be noted.

Of course none of this is evidence that an identical theology can be found among Methodists wherever one goes in the world. A survey of beliefs held by individual Methodist members in Britain, if undertaken, would reveal a considerable degree of variation from what the Faith and Order Committee and the Conference consider to be the norm. World-wide the variation will be even greater. In Britain and Ireland one of the structural supports of a shared theology is a common hymnbook, on which a Methodist identity is stamped by the Wesley hymns. In other parts of the world these have largely fallen into disuse or have never been translated. Another factor in shaping the beliefs of church members is a common tradition of preaching, reinforced by connexional training and standards. These also vary across the world.

Official doctrinal standards tend to be either historical texts, like Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*, or compromise documents like our Deed of Union and the doctrinal statements in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, which may be appealed to when contention arises but ignored from day to day. They do represent, at the point of their adoption, some sort of general consensus, and tend to support the continuation of that consensus thereafter, but they are no guarantee of it. How far do Wesley's views of Christian perfection and its attainability, as expressed in the *Sermons* and *Notes*, represent the beliefs of British Methodists today?

Reports of ecumenical dialogues represent what Methodist participants believe they can with integrity subscribe to on behalf of the churches they represent, but, as the comments of our own Faith and Order Committee on the World Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogues indicate, they cannot guarantee to carry their churches with them, and certainly do not reflect the views of all individual Methodists.⁴

Generalisations therefore about what Methodists in the pew believe world-wide are hazardous, not to say impossible.

A better place to look would be the authorised expositions of theology put out from time to time by the relevant authorities of each church in the Methodist tradition. A comprehensive and detailed analysis however of such material has yet to be undertaken. The nearest thing we have is the reports of ecumenical dialogues. Nevertheless in the absence of such research it is possible to attempt some generalisations. If one attends, not only to the content of ecumenical dialogues but also to the discourse of Methodists from diverse contexts around the world when they meet in the Oxford Institute or other forums, and particularly those accredited as representatives of their churches whose views may therefore be taken as characteristic, I believe one can detect a broad profile, which explains the sense of family when Methodists from different countries meet.

A broad profile

There is, first, the fact already alluded to, that all the churches concerned come within the broad spectrum of trinitarian Protestant orthodoxy. In the Institute there have been vigorous debates about the contemporary relevance of some traditional doctrines over against more pressing issues of liberation and justice, and questions about the patriarchal character of the biblical and later Christian tradition. By 1987 all members of the Institute had been made sharply aware of the issues raised by liberation theology in its various forms and were beginning to recognise that global poverty was a context that in different ways embraced them all. But there has been no serious attempt to disown those traditions. It is here especially that the absences are telling. Key features of Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, such as the veneration of Mary, the adoration of the consecrated Host or the monastic tradition, are missing. Methodism is in the Protestant fold.

There is, secondly, the presence of John Wesley in the collective memory. He has been regarded by some as a sort of collective mascot, by others as an evangelistic bench-mark from which all subsequent generations have declined, by others again as an embarrassment to ecumenical progress, by yet others simply as an irrelevance. Whatever the view taken of him, we are stuck with him. I think it can be shown that one of the contributions of the Oxford Institute since 1982 has been to encourage consideration of his theological contribution. His capacity to blend the traditions of east and west, Catholic and Protestant, and particularly his commitment to the poor, has sparked interest among theologians in very diverse contexts and generated some first-rate

theological writing. A second feature of my attempted profile, then, would be an awareness of John Wesley and the question of his contemporary relevance.

Thirdly, churches in the Methodist tradition would consider themselves to be mission churches, for whom evangelism in some form is an imperative. The response to the World Methodist Council's initiatives for global evangelism is evidence of the powerful attraction of the idea, even if, for some of us, questions about method and objectives abound. Notoriously many churches in the global south are growing while many in the north are struggling. Even where, however, as in this country, there is no discernible overall growth, its absence causes concern, not just because no one likes to belong to a shrinking organisation, but because of a deep sense that it is contrary to Methodism's identity. We were born as a movement of mission, the genes remain with us and we feel frustrated.

Allied with this is the fact that Methodist churches are Arminian in their theology. The formal eighteenth-century controversies with Calvinism have died away, but it would be a mistake to assume that no differences of nuance remain, or that all those in the Reformed tradition hold the same mediating position as was expressed in the World Methodist/World Alliance of Reformed Churches dialogue of 1985–87.⁵ There are no signs however of any Methodist change of heart on the issue. For us, Christ died for all, and we do not have much room in our thinking for notions of election.

Another common feature is the stress on what Wesley referred to as experimental religion – the religion of the heart, conversion, personal piety, and growth in grace. This has received criticism, particularly from Latin American theologians, who have argued that it distracts the believer from engagement in social action and reflection on the social and political dimensions of life. The criticism is often valid, but it is essentially a call for a redefinition of what it means to be converted and personally committed, not a move away from conversion and personal commitment as such. It is hard to say where holiness fits into this spirituality. In some churches in the Methodist family it is a major emphasis, in some others possibly a dead letter. In some the stress is on the pursuit of national and international justice rather than personal improvement. Where the holiness tradition continues it is variously interpreted.

One last common feature may be noted. Methodist churches stand in the connexional tradition and adhere to a more or less centralized polity

involving conference, both as an authority within the church and as a method of coming to decisions. Of course the structures and the interpretations put upon them vary from church to church (as for example, in the absence or presence of bishops, and where present, in their authority and relation to other elements in the structure), but connexion (even if spelled differently) and conference are common parlance. This is ecclesiologicaly significant and an element of a shared theology.

In future?

In the last few paragraphs I have attempted a profile, and I acknowledge its subjectivity. It would be nonsense to claim that any one of these features, excepting the reference to Wesley, is exclusive to Methodism, but taken together I believe they are typical of the family world-wide. The various components are given different weight and interpreted in different ways in different places, but I suspect they are all to be found. But does it all add up to a common theology? Yes, in the sense that all the items (including conference and connexion) have theological significance; no, in the sense that they do not represent a coherently integrated theological package consciously held as such. The various member churches of world Methodism hold to them because they have inherited them, but they have not spent over-much time working out their inter-relations.⁶

It is here that the work of the Oxford Institute has potential. Over the years it has addressed a variety of contemporary issues from the perspective of John Wesley's life and thought: liberation and sanctification, evangelism, global poverty, community and power, the old creation and the new. Other historical periods beside the eighteenth century have been studied in specialist groups, but it is the eighteenth that provides the common ground between the various traditions, because the nineteenth and twentieth witnessed the separation and diversification that now accounts for the complexity of world Methodism.

As already mentioned, a significant contribution of the Institute has been an awakening of interest in Wesley as a theologian, and as a result of the work that has been done, inside and outside the Institute meetings, it is now easier to see how the various elements in his thought hold together and what they may offer for contemporary thought. Aspects of his thought, such as his deep commitment to the poor and his concern for social and economic conditions, hitherto often neglected because of concentration on Aldersgate, have been brought to the fore. Of course there can be no question of imposing an eighteenth-century framework or

limiting theological inquiry to the lines he initiated. Our world is immeasurably different from his. But the more a coherence is seen in the various elements of his thought the easier it will be for the contemporary churches to recognise the coherence of those theological emphases they have inherited from him.

Does it matter? The question is not just whether there is a 'world Methodist theology' but whether there needs to be one. A single, clearly defined Methodist position on all topics would undoubtedly be convenient for ecumenical dialogue, but an authentic response by each church and local community to the context in which they are called to serve God is surely more important even if it leads to greater diversification. Yet one of the dangers of diversity is that we get trapped in our contexts. One of the services the Oxford Institute has rendered over the years has been to enable, even compel, Methodists from diverse traditions and different parts of the world to listen to each other and to recognise the limited nature of the perspective each has on the world. Within its meetings, representatives from the affluent and dominant west have had to listen to those who represent the world's poor and oppressed. Those who have pressed the case for liberation theology have had to hear those for whom inter-faith dialogue is an even greater priority.

The Institute has witnessed many confrontations, yet participants return, particularly, I believe, because of the sense of a shared inheritance to be explored. The take-up of the proceedings published after each Institute has not been high, and without committed and indulgent publishers they would not have seen the light of day. But the influence of the Institute has not been confined to its published proceedings. Its members have been ministers (preachers, therefore) and theological teachers, ordained and lay. Many have held positions of leadership in their respective churches. Having been influenced by the encounters in the Institute they have in turn exercised an influence within their own spheres. While they may have been critical of some of what they have heard, they have also been shaped by it, and so wider perspectives on the world and on the Methodist tradition in its various forms have been disseminated. These are small seeds, but they perhaps hold the possibility for the future of a more developed and more clearly articulated Methodist theological position worldwide.

NOTES

1. For a history of the Institute see my *Exploring Methodism's Heritage*, Nashville, Tennessee, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2004.

2. M. Douglas Meeks, *What Should Methodists Teach? Wesleyan Tradition and Modern Diversity*, Nashville, Tennessee, Kingswood Books, 1990, p.132.
3. For a survey of these see the Faith and Order Committee's report to the 2003 Conference (*Agenda* pp. 161–80).
4. See the Committee's 2003 report cited in the last note and compare the treatment given to ARCIC I by the Vatican. The generous attitude to the possibility in the future of an 'effective leadership and primacy in the bishop of Rome' (*Towards a Statement on the Church*, Lake Junaluska, World Methodist Council, 1986, para. 62) would not find an echo among many Methodists in the pew.
5. 'Distorted teaching on these points still adversely and directly affects the lives of people in some parts of the world...We believe the key...must be the doctrine of Christ as God's Elect One in whom we receive our standing.' (London Colney Report, Lake Junaluska, World Methodist Council, 1985)
6. In saying this, I am not ignoring the work of particular writers, but they have written as individuals; there has been, so far as I am aware, no inter-church articulation of a shared theological position.