

Our Wesleyan Heritage After Two Centuries

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IV.

Is the Heritage Larger Than We Have Realized?

Not many years ago a Presbyterian clergyman of Toronto, Canada, went to London to pursue graduate studies. While working in the Library of the British Museum on documents relating to the Industrial Revolution, he developed an unexpected fascination. He was "captivated," to use his own word, by the "sheer majesty" of the man who had been the Abraham Lincoln of the socially depressed classes in England—Lord Shaftesbury. "I could do none other," says he, "than pause for years and write his life." Then he adds, in a comment that is extraordinarily interesting, "*When I began that task, I had no special interest either in Wesley or the Evangelical Revival. . . . But soon I was challenged by the fact that Lord Shaftesbury, the prince of social reformers and a mighty statesman, considered Wesley 'the greatest character in modern history.' Soon, too, I came to realize that one could never understand Shaftesbury until one understood the Evangelical Revival, of which he was a product, and which had inspired his every ideal.*"¹

Thus it was that John Wesley Brady, now one of the world's foremost authorities on Wesleyana, came to write his volume on *England: Before and After Wesley*. After running through five large editions in Britain, it was condensed and republished in America under the title *This Freedom—Whence?* Dr. Brady's thesis is that the Evangelical Awakening which was mediated chiefly by John Wesley, "marks the birth of a new and sensitive social con-

science, and is the chief source of our modern liberties." This thesis he ably maintains against the popular theory that our social and political liberties stem from the French Enlightenment as symbolized by such names as Voltaire and Rousseau.

This story of Dr. Brady's sudden awakening to the larger meanings of the Wesleyan movement is suggestive both of the paucity of knowledge from which many people are suffering and of the need of a fresh inquiry into the vast social and cultural ramifications of that vitalized evangelicalism which flowed across and beyond England in the eighteenth century. "Wesley," according to the *Cambridge Modern History*, "brought forth water from the rocks to make a barren land live again." That water, we must now see, flowed in many and diverse channels. To return to the figures of "estate" and "inheritance," our legacy from Wesley is larger, much larger, than most of the sons and daughters of the twentieth century have been made to realize. I shall endeavor to show that it is larger (1) in its *creative refusals*, (2) in its *historical accruals*, and (3) in its *social espousals*.

I.

For one thing, it is larger in what I shall call its *creative refusals*. Probably no prophets of spiritual awakening ever had more reason to be intimidated by the bleakness and barrenness of the conditions they faced than did Wesley and Whitfield and their associates. The England into which they were born has been designated by the

¹Brady, *Wesley and Democracy*, pp. 17, 18.

²Brady, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Cambridge Modern History as a land of "materialism," "dim ideals," and "expiring hopes." Now and again a voice is raised to warn us against the danger of thinking that the England of the first three Georges was wholly bad. The caution is not without reason. Yet nothing can obscure the fact that for politics, business, society, and religion it was a period of astounding corruption and callousness.

Deistic rationalism was in full bloom. The pollen of this poisonous weed had traveled far. With undisguised satisfaction, though not without exaggeration, Montesquieu, while visiting among the English intellectuals, could write back to France that everywhere in the circles in which he moved religion was obsolete. "If anyone mentioned it," said he, "everyone laughed."

The Church was venal, incredibly worldly, and tragically sterile. Ecclesiastical positions, whether those of curates or primates, were bought and sold like seats on a modern stock exchange. One of the primates used to excuse himself for his much swearing by saying that he "swore as a baronet and not as a bishop." It was not that such *profanity* was widespread but that such *reasoning* was prevalent!

Drunkenness and debauchery were nauseatingly rife. Gin-shops hung signs which read: "Drunk for 1 penny. Dead drunk, 2 pence. Free staw." Something of this soddenness spread to high places, for it was not altogether uncommon for the Mother of Parliaments to adjourn early because "the honourable members were too inebriated to continue the business of State."

Brazenness and bestiality were common enough to be accepted almost without protest. For example, such performances as cock-fighting, bull-fighting, badger-baiting, and bare-fisted prize fighting were not staged clandestinely but were popular public sports. London had its own precursors of the modern "zoot suit" riots. The mobs that ranged and raged through "London town" have been described by Sir Walter Besant as "brutal beyond all power of words to describe, or imagination to understand; so bestial that one is induced to

think that there has never been in any town or in any age a population which could compare with them."

Now when conditions in Church, State, and Society are as corrupt as they were in Wesley's day, three courses of action are open to those who have within them the seed of Christian faith and life: (1) they may compromise with these conditions and eventually succumb to them; (2) they may withdraw from them and become nothing more than pietistic islands in a heaving ocean of corruption; (3) they may challenge the vicious *status quo* with the anointed vigor of Christ's redemptive heralds.

Fortunately, both for themselves and for the world, Wesley and his helpers wholeheartedly chose the last course. They were not bound by any fatalistic view of eschatology which required them to believe that *this* was the final apostasy and that, therefore, nothing radically curative could be done about it. Writing for our day in his brave little book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Dr. Carl F. H. Henry says: "The despair (that is, among many fundamentalists) over the present age is grounded in the anticipated lack of response to the redemptive Gospel, rather than in any inherent defect in the message itself."

No such "anticipated lack of response" paralyzed the witness or withered the passion of those whom God used to promote the Evangelical Awakening. Theirs was the creative refusal! Declining to despair, they set their inflamed hearts on something beyond the *need* of revival, namely the *possibility* of revival.

II.

Consider a second aspect of our Wesleyan heritage which has wider and richer substance than many of our contemporaries realized: its *historical accruals*. More than a hint of my meaning is contained in a statement made a few years ago by the late Lord Baldwin. "Historians," said Britain's one time Prime Minister, "who filled

¹Bready, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

²Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, p. 29.

their pages with Napoleon and had nothing to say of Wesley, now realize that they cannot explain nineteenth century England until they can explain Wesley." And he added: "I believe it is equally true to say that you cannot understand twentieth century America, unless you understand Wesley."

I have already referred to the curious "accident" by which the scholarly attention of Dr. J. W. Bready found an entirely new focus. That experience of his has immense implications. He wants to know about the evolution of industrial liberty in Britain. The quest leads him to Lord Shaftesbury. Lord Shaftesbury in turn leads him back to the Evangelical Revival and to Wesley, whom Shaftesbury regarded as "the greatest character in modern history."

Shaftesbury's father was an alcoholic and his mother was a social butterfly, but his nurse, Maria Millis, was an earnest Christian. She was a true daughter of the Wesleyan revival. It was she who led the future prince of reformers to Christ and moulded his sensitive Christian character.

Look now at his achievements through the years that followed. He authored such enlightened economic enactments as the Ten Hours Bills, the Mines and Collieries Act, the Lodging House Acts, the Chimney-Sweep Acts. He was the first president of the Y.M.C.A. and of the Ragged School Union. He was the originator of the Crimean Sanitary Commission, which gave Florence Nightingale her opportunity and brought her before the world. In total he was associated with approximately two hundred societies for the moral and social improvement of the people. After his death one of the most discerning tributes paid to him was that of the Duke of Argyll, who said in Parliament: "The social reforms of the last century have not been due mainly to the Liberal Party, but to the influence, character, and perseverance of one man—Lord Shaftesbury."

In much the same manner it is possible to trace the authentic connections which existed between the Wesleyan revival and

the work of such men as William Wilberforce and Thomas Buxton in the field of slavery reform; such pioneers as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry in the area of penal and prison improvement; such friends of youth as Robert Raikes with his Sunday School movement, Sir George Williams with his Y.M.C.A., Thomas Barnardo with his homes for destitute and neglected children; General William Booth with his Salvation Army; and Frances Willard with her Women's Christian Temperance Union.

It is with such facts in mind that Dr. Bready declares: "During fifty-three years of inimitable labor, as a single-minded crusader for God and righteousness, Wesley created character-values, organizations, and institutions which at a hundred points were to affect the voluntary heritage of the Anglo-Saxon Democracies."

III.

Closely linked with its historical accruals are the *social espousals* which form a legitimate part of our Wesleyan heritage. If Mr. Wesley's preaching and planning had not been weighted with a sense of social responsibility, the movement with which his name is identified would have taken a very different turn. It might have congealed in a theological backwater or eddied in a pietistic cult. It did neither. It called for—and produced—regeneration of personal character and reorientation of social activities and responsibilities.

"Christianity," Mr. Wesley insisted, "is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." While modern extremists in the camp of the so-called "social gospel" should beware of reading their characteristic superficialities into that sentence, it remains true that for John Wesley, as for an earlier "John," it was a piece of folly to talk about loving God unless there were the fruits of love for man also. It was equally incongruous to prate about the "Gospel" or gloat over "orthodoxy" when there was patently no living in faith in Christ by which the power of sin was broken and life was re-directed along "the paths of righteousness."

¹F. W. Boreham, *A Casket of Cameos*, p. 256.

When Mr. Wesley told his preachers, "Remember you have nothing to do but save souls," his concept of soul-saving was bigger than most non-evangelical social historians have realized. It was likewise bigger than some of our fervid evangelical contemporaries have been aware. For example, the flaming little prophet who had "nothing to do but to save souls" was not too preoccupied to concern himself, and to urge others to concern, regarding the reformation in prison procedures and conditions for which the eighteenth century stood in such dire need. Denouncing the infamous Newgate prison, he said: "I know not if to one of thinking, sensible turn of mind, there could be anything like it this side of hell." Nor did he stop with mere denunciation. According to Thomas Dodd, in his *John Wesley: A Study for the Times*, he and some of his confreres of the Holy Club directed some of their vigorous personal efforts "to the amelioration of prison horrors." Mr. Wesley, moreover, gave strong encouragement to the work of John Howard, whose name will remain forever lustrous in the history of penal enlightenment.

Or, take the question of human slavery. The traffic in the African "blacks" was proceeding unblushingly when the Spirit of God began to blow mightily on the hearts of the early Methodist leaders. It flourished in part because it was immensely lucrative to the traders and owners, and in part because the deistic rationalism that was in vogue afforded no ethical leverage for opposing it. This philosophy was well summed up in Pope's line: "One truth is clear. Whatever is, is right!"

Yet the man who had "nothing to do but to save souls" was not too busy preaching free grace to sinners on the common to engage in a vigorous crusade against "that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion"—slavery. "Can human law," he cried, "turn darkness into light or evil into good? Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right and wrong is wrong still. . . . I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice." These burning words are

typical of the treatise from which they are taken, his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. They gave direct and dynamic inspiration to the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade which was formed a few years after they were published. As for the ardent and active support which Mr. Wesley gave to the Parliamentary struggle to free the slaves, the whole world knows of the classic which he wrote to William Wilberforce, in which he implored, "Oh, be not weary in well doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might, till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it."

Again, consider the liquor traffic. The man who had "nothing to do but to save souls" was at the same time concerned with the creation of a new and healthy conscience, both personal and civil, with respect to the manufacture and use of alcoholic beverages. Indeed Dr. Bready asserts: "That Wesley became the most effective temperance advocate the English-speaking world has yet reared, is a claim which will square with facts." Some of the sentences that Dr. Bready quotes from Wesley's *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* sound as if they might have been uttered by Sam Morris or Guy Cutshall in the present hour. "Why is food so dear?" asks Wesley. Then, in self-reply, he proceeds: "The grand cause is because such immense quantities of corn are continually consumed in distilling. . . . Nearly half of the wheat produced in the Kingdom is consumed, not in so harmless a way as throwing it into the sea, but by converting it into deadly poison, poison that naturally destroys not only the strength and life but also the morals of our countrymen."⁶

Take one more of the social espousals which appear clearly in the original Wesleyan movement. I refer to the cause of education. An anecdote has it that when a brother arose in a religious meeting—I know not where—and declared that he "thanked God for his ignorance," there was a wag present who remarked that he "had a lot to be thankful for!" John Wesley

⁶Bready, *This Freedom—Whence?* quoted on p. 161.

would have approved the viewpoint, if not the spirit, of the wag. "Preach expressly on education," he told his preachers. He enlisted their aid in circulating the *Christian Library*, a set of fifty volumes which he personally edited and arranged. It was this sort of far-visioned planning and promotion that the editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* have in mind when they say that "No man in the eighteenth century did so much to create a taste for good reading, and to supply it with books at the lowest prices." Such authorities as Stopford Brooke willingly acknowledge that the first impulse to popular education in Britain came from the Wesleyan awakening. As a consequence, millions of Anglo-Saxon children received the benefits of voluntary educational agencies long before the State accepted this responsibility. Incidentally, it is only when one begins to trace the links in a long series of causes and effects that he discovers how colossal is the debt which contemporary democracy owes to a revival of religion in eighteenth century England.

Yes, the heritage which rests in our hands is bigger than most of us have been aware. There are yet other riches contained in it that I have not made any attempt to explore, as, for example, Mr. Wesley's ideals with respect to the stewardship of property and money or the global missionary obligation which he felt so poignantly. The question which must now most greatly concern us is this: what are we doing with so great a trust as has been committed to us? If John Wesley were to rise from the dead and look us over with an appraising eye, would he feel that we are serving *our* day and generation with the same total Gospel with which he confronted *his* era? To state the issue succinctly: is it enough that we preach on "Christian Perfection" "frequently" and "explicitly," but never

preach on "education expressly"? Mr. Wesley would do both.

Professor Carl Henry, in the volume to which I have previously referred, tells about a question he put to a group of more than a hundred evangelical pastors. "How many of you," he asked, "during the past six months, have preached a sermon devoted in large part to a condemnation of such evils as aggressive warfare, racial hatred and intolerance, the liquor traffic, exploitation of labor or management, or the like—a sermon containing not merely an incidental or illustrative reference, but directed mainly against such evils and proposing the framework in which you think solution is possible?" Not a single hand was raised in response!

If John Wesley were to appear among us, he would say to *liberalism*: "You have social awareness, but you lack depth in your understanding of man's depravity and of the Gospel's supernaturalness." He would say to *fundamentalism*: "You have a realistic view of man's sinfulness and an adequate Christ, but you fail to make explicit the relevance of your Gospel to the ills and evils of society." He would say to neo-orthodoxy: "You have a great God and a profound grasp of man's evil, but you undervalue the integrity of the Scriptures and responsibility of man for carrying the witness of the Word into every area of life and society."

These criticisms over, perhaps he would then help us to fashion a *neo-evangelicalism* in which we should feel ourselves under a dual obligation: to "spread Scriptural holiness" and to "reform the nation." It is no more necessary to envisage utopian success in the second direction than the first. But the obligation is there just the same!

¹Henry, *Ibid.*, p. 18.