

Metodismo e império: os começos

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Resumo

O cristianismo nasce no contexto do Império Romano, tendo a tentação de se adaptar ao império acompanhado o cristianismo desde então. Em tempos mais recentes, o metodismo se formou dentro do contexto do Império Britânico e do Império Norte-americano. Este artigo investiga como o império modelou a teologia, mas mostra também que o império nunca foi capaz de controlá-la de forma absoluta, e que a teologia tem condições de fazer a diferença e resistir ao *status quo*.

Palavras chaves

Império – metodismo – poder – religião e política – pós-colonialismo.

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Methodism and Empire: The Beginnings

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Abstract

Christianity was born in the context of the Roman Empire, and the temptation to adapt to empire has accompanied Christianity ever since. In more recent times, Methodism has shaped in up the context of the British and U.S. Empires. This essay investigates how empire has shaped theology but it also demonstrates that empire was never able to take over completely and that theology is able to make a difference and resist the status quo.

Key words

Empire – methodism – power – religion and politics – postcolonialism.

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Metodismo e imperio: los comienzos

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Resumen

El cristianismo nace en el contexto del Imperio Romano, teniendo la tentación de adaptarse al imperio acompañando, desde entonces, al cristianismo. En tiempos más recientes, el metodismo se formó dentro del contexto del Imperio Británico y del Imperio Norteamericano. Este artículo investiga cómo el imperio modeló la teología, y muestra también que el imperio nunca fue capaz de controlarla de forma absoluta, y que la teología tiene condiciones de hacer la diferencia y resistir al *status quo*.

Palabras claves

Imperio – metodismo – poder – religión y política – pos colonialismo.

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Methodism and Empire: The Beginnings¹

Christianity was born in the context of the Roman Empire. The temptation to adapt to empire and to become a part of it has accompanied Christianity ever since. Jesus himself was tempted by an imperial mindset. The temptations he endured, as reported in the gospels, are the temptations of empire. One example is the devil's offer of control over all the empires of the world, which Jesus duly declines (Mt. 4.8-10).

What if we take a look at Methodism in this perspective? How does Methodism fare when it hooks up with empire? In this investigation, we have to deal with two key problems. The first problem has to do with the metamorphoses of empire. We are usually able to identify empire in its most blatant forms, like for instance in the Roman Empire, the Crusades of the medieval empires, nineteenth century colonialism, the German Third Reich, and several of the current moves of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush. In all these cases, the term empire is used (and often positively embraced), and the contemporary situation in the United States is no exception. But what about softer forms of power? What about the U.S. before Bush? What about the soft colonialisms of earlier times, whose emissaries were supposed to help, educate, train, and support? What about a Bartolomé de Las Casas, for instance, who defended the humanity of the Amerindians but kept insisting on their need for improvement (since he assumed that their humanity was located at a somewhat lower cultural and religious level than that of the missionaries)?.

The second problem has to do with

simplistic assumptions about religion and politics and the relation of the two. It is commonly known that the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. was called and shaped by the Emperor Constantine. Unfortunately, the problem has usually been addressed by separating religion and politics. Most theologians proceed as if there was somehow an underlying pristine theological core, more or less untouched by the political affairs of the empire. The modern conceptual separation of religion and politics has only made things worse in this regard. But can we really assume that religion and politics run on different tracks? Was not Constantine's politics undergirded by a robust theology, which clearly identified God at work in favor of the empire? And can an alternative theology even be imagined without alternative political connotations?

John Wesley offers a first clue that helps us address those two problems. In a brief entry in his Journal of May 25, 1764 he says: "Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men." (WESLEY 1872: 466). This is a remarkable insight on many levels. I have commented on it in other places, particularly in my introduction to *Methodist and Radical*. (RIEGER / VINCENT 2003). Wesley's statement contributes a new vision on the two problems noted above: it illumines the relation of religion and politics and it helps us get our bearings on empire.

Let me start with the second problem, the relation of religion and politics. Mainline theology has hardly considered the possibility that religion might have a certain directionality. Wesley talks about religion going from the top down. Clearly, this is a comment on religion in relation to power. There is a problem, says Wesley, when religion works hand in glove with top-down power. This insight foreshadows what the field of contemporary cultural studies is in the process of investigating: the relationships between cultural (and re-

¹ An earlier version of material in this article was presented at the meeting of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in August of 2007.

ligious) forces and power. How does the history of Methodism and Methodist theology shape up in light of this question? A whole new field of research opens up here. If we begin to understand that there is a certain combination of religion and politics that is problematic, what is the alternative? Some might think that we should simply separate religion from politics. But that option does not appear to exist in Wesley's statement. Those on top — the "greatest," who are used to operating from the top down and who make things happen that way — follow a certain logic that somehow shapes the logic of a certain kind of religion. We might add that even those in the middle who look to the top to get things done become part of this logic.

The alternative would be to think about religion that moves from the bottom up, which happens to be the initial direction of the Methodist movement. Religion and power are not separated here but put together in a different way. The power of religion which these early Methodists saw at work moved from the bottom up, no doubt a surprise to many, thereby raising some interesting theological questions. If this bottom-up power, unlike top-down power, cannot immediately be explained as being "of men," whose power is it? This view from the underside has found its way even into the hymns and poetry of the Methodist movement, although it is not surprising that the following hymn by Charles Wesley cannot be found in most current hymnals:

The rich and great in every age
Conspire to persecute their God.
Our Saviour, by the rich unknown,
Is worshipped by the poor alone.
(MOLTMANN 1992: 166-167).

John Wesley's statement about the direction of religion also helps us deal with the first problem, the definition of empire. Empire might be understood in very broad terms as this top-down power whi-

ch is "of men," which has the means to control everything else and thus to shape the world in its own image. This top-down power can take many different shapes and forms. It is perhaps most clearly visible in the use of military force; throwing bombs out of airplanes symbolizes a power that moves straight from the top down and that approaches omnipotence the less it has to fear repercussions (following the classical logic of Aristotle's first unmoved mover). But this top-down power might also be embodied in certain humanitarian efforts that seek to bring perceived benefits and achievements of our lifestyles to others. Teaching others "how to fish" (instead of giving them fish), the paradigm of a much-admired program even today, assumes that other people elsewhere are simply incapable of taking care of their most basic needs. This means that we need to look for empire even in "postcolonial" times, when most of the classic nineteenth and twentieth century colonialisms have been brought to an end. Top-down power is a pervasive problem, and we need to address it as theologians and Christians not merely as a political issue but, more importantly, because it shapes our theology and our faith, whether we realize it or not. In other words, we are dealing with a pristine theological issue here.

In sum, the problem with empire is the sort of top-down power that moves from "the greatest to the least" and which is unable to take seriously alternative expressions and ways of life. The result is that the expressions of the divine that do not fit with the status quo are not taken seriously either. The theological problem is that our images of God and God's power are shaped by factors for which much theology as it is done now is not capable of giving an account. Of course, alternative theological expressions may be allowed in order to provide some color and diversion, but these alternatives are always relegated to a secondary position. In two recent projects I have talked about this as empi-

re, defined as massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life (even the religious) and which cannot be controlled by any one actor alone (see RIEGER 2007a e RIEGER 2007b).

A positive project grows out of these observations. If we begin to pay attention to how a theological tradition has been shaped by empire (consciously and unconsciously), we can then take a look at what I have called its “theological surplus” (RIEGER 2007a: 9), e.g., that which escapes the clutches of empire and points beyond it. This is the good news: empire is not all-powerful. Empires have never been able to assimilate the divine completely; sometimes, we find the roots of these theological surpluses in a basic ambivalence. I have argued this point in more detail in *Christ and Empire*, looking at various theological developments from Paul to postcolonial times. In the following, I would like to take an initial look at the Methodist traditions.

Not only can theology help analyze what is going on, especially where empire assimilates concepts of the ultimate; theology can also point us in new directions and give us new hope. Throughout its history, theology has frequently been employed in the support of empire and occasionally in the critique of it, and often there is only a thin line between the two. Yet the existence of such ambivalence is itself a witness to the limits of empire. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha notes how ambivalence is disturbing to colonial discourse and how it “poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.” (BHABHA 1994: 86)²² The challenge, he argues, is a “double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of co-

lonial discourse also disrupts its authority.” (BHABHA 1994: 88)³³ Ambivalence, especially the sort that is generated from the tensions and ruptures felt at the margins of empire, is thus a welcome companion in any effort to move beyond the confines of empire. This is the sort of ambivalence that David Hempton has found at the heart of Methodism: “Methodism at its heart and center had always been a profoundly countercultural movement. It drew energy and personal commitment from the dialectics arising from its challenge to accepted norms in religion and society. It thrived on opposition, but it could not long survive equipoise.” (HEMPTON 2005: 210). Could this lack of ambivalence be one of the reasons of the current malaise of Methodism?

One of the key insights of Hempton’s book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* is that Methodism thrived on dialectical tensions, beginning with Wesley himself: “It was Methodism’s genius that throughout the English-speaking world it was able to act for so long both as a countercultural movement of populist revivalism and as an enforcer of social stability and sobriety, though not always in the same place at the same time. It was Methodism’s misfortune... that it could not oscillate between these poles forever” (HEMPTON 2005: 128). Hempton lists the following dialectical tensions, going back to Wesley himself: between discipline and emotions, work ethic and ritual, emancipation for the oppressed and “unrelenting bourgeois ethic of acquisitiveness.” (HEMPTON 2005: 201). This is not to say that ambivalence and dialectical tensions are always modes of resistance to empire. E.P. Thompson, an important interpreter of Methodism who still deserves a hearing, points out a sort

²² Bhabha connects this term with his more famous notion of “mimicry”: “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” (emphasis in original). By repeating colonial images (with a slight difference,) rather than representing them accurately, mimicry establishes a challenge to the colonial narcissism and fiction of self-identity (BHABHA 1994: 88).

³³ While Bhabha sees this ambivalence of mimicry as a surface effect and does not want to see this as too closely related with the Freudian notion of the “return of the repressed,” I do not think that these matters are mutually exclusive. For an effort to read Bhabha’s work in relation to the notion repression (see RIEGER 2004: 204-220; RIEGER 2008).

of ambivalence that contributes to empire, as we shall see.

The Beginnings

Like Christianity, Methodism was born in the context of empire. In England, the British Empire represented a typical colonial power. Of course, not everyone was in agreement with the direction of the colonial empire. One of the most prominent critiques came from Adam Smith, the father of capitalist economics, who wondered openly about the economic profitability of having colonies (YOUNG 2001: 82ff).⁴⁴ In so doing, he anticipated the contemporary situation where capitalism extracts wealth from around the globe without having to maintain colonies. John Wesley was among those who raised questions about the Empire for a completely different set of reasons, as Theodore Jennings has shown. (JENNINGS 2007).

Like early Christianity, Methodism had a radical edge that could not easily be assimilated to the regulations of empire. Early Methodists were considered to be "disturbers of the world." (HEMPTON 2005: 87). It is well known that Methodism had a tendency to get in trouble with traditional authorities, both social and ecclesial, and that it transgressed established boundaries between clergy and lay, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Clearly, the ambivalence that Methodism introduced into the empire's struggle for order and control originated from below. In the words of David Hempton: "This lack of official control was exacerbated by the fact that Methodism often took strongest root in marginal areas, scattered settlements, and new industrial and mining environments where the traditional social cement was weakest." (HEMPTON 2005: 87).

Methodism has deep roots in the worlds of lower class and marginalized people. In the U.S., for instance, African Americans who had resisted Christianity for almost a century, converted to Methodism after the 1770s (HEMPTON 2005: 131-132).

Even E.P. Thompson, who otherwise identifies Methodism as a "religion for the poor" rather than "of the poor" (THOMPSON 1966: 37), notes a countercultural spirit in early Methodism. In tension with Wesley's more authoritarian style, Methodism included democratic elements, not only with its lay preachers but also with forms of self-government within the societies. In Thompson's words: "Wesley could not escape the consequences of his own spiritual egalitarianism. If Christ's poor came to believe that their souls were as good as aristocratic or bourgeois souls then it might lead them on to the arguments of the *Rights of Man*." (THOMPSON 1966: 42). To be sure, this is no empowerment "from above," where power is given to people by those who are higher up in the system. This is about people finding their own voice and developing their own resilience to the system.

Hempton, seeking to avoid a narrow interpretation of the Methodist movement in terms of class, insists that class conflict and religious conflict are always related. His point is well taken that religious movements are closely related to radical change and that social movements are never completely secular. (HEMPTON 1996: 173). There is no need to play off those two aspects of the struggle, an insight that opens the door for talking about class conflict in theology in a new way. Economic reductionism is not helpful, and much Marxist thought (a major informant on the realities of the class struggle) has developed in ways that respect the role of religion. Equally important for us as theologians, however, is to understand that a theological reductionism is not helpful either. Religion never develops in a vacuum and a

⁴ Smith also critiqued slavery on grounds of its economic inefficiency.

decision needs to be made as to where it stands in regard to class, i.e., whether it pursues the way "from the greatest to the least" or not. In this regard, Albert Outler's notion of Wesley as a folk theologian might be helpful, but in inverted fashion. While Outler had in mind Wesley's gift to communicate "things above" to the lower classes, we need to wonder what it is that Wesley learned from the lower classes and how Methodist theology was able to hold on to a theological surplus and to make a difference for this reason.

Nevertheless, Methodist resistance to empire is not without tensions. E.P. Thompson stands for others when he notes the traits of Methodism that made it fit for empire. The Methodist "work-discipline," for instance, could easily lead to "psychic exploitation." Moreover, Methodism, while supporting workers at times, also contributed to the ideology of the Industrial Revolution.⁵⁵ The tensions are also portrayed by Gregory Schneider, who talks about the domestication of the Methodist impulse: "If it gave common people the opportunity to establish their own religious life, to think and act for themselves, it also catered to their need for charismatic and authoritarian 'fathers' who would perpetuate dependence in their spiritual 'children' and a nondemocratic ethos in what they called the 'family of God.'" He continues that "the public, political significance of Methodism must be seen in similarly ambiguous terms." (SCHNEIDER 1993: 207). Yet Schneider's conclusion, that "the history of Methodist evangelicalism does not lend itself easily to any moral or political agenda, be it progressive or conservative," (SCHNEIDER

1989: 208) does not necessarily follow. Jesus had it right: no one can serve two masters, God and Mammon. There is a sort of ambivalence that leads to an adjustment to the status quo, but there is also a sort of ambivalence that points to resistance.

When all is said and done, the fact that Methodism helped the laity to find its own voice and power, inside and outside the church, must not be overlooked. The "priesthood of all believers" had a tendency to unsettle the status quo both in the church and in the world.⁶⁶ A "theological surplus" can be found where lay people engage in functions once thought only appropriate for the clergy, such as preaching and holding offices in the church. This story is not limited to the Methodism of the eighteenth century. My mother, coming to Methodism from the German Lutheran Church in the 1960s, still made similar experiences: in a situation where there is little opportunity for lay persons, and women in particular, to assume positions of leadership, the Methodist communities made a real difference. It is not surprising that Methodism was received especially well "in areas least amenable to paternalistic influence." (HEMPTON 1996: 7).

In these developments, intent may be a secondary issue. While Wesley's educational work may not have had a subversive intent, as Ken Bedell has argued, the question is how it functioned in the context of empire in which it found itself (BEDELL 2007: 19). This emphasis on education took clearly subversive shape in Primitive Methodism. In their Sunday Schools, they taught children not only to read (thought to be appropriate since it helped them to read the Bible), they also taught them writing and math in order to gain valuable skills, a praxis that was not endorsed by mainline Methodism (HATCHER 2003: 128).

⁵ Thompson puts it this way: "Methodism and Utilitarianism, taken together, make up the dominant ideology of the Industrial Revolution." (THOMPSON 1966: 401 and 375, 391). While seeking to challenge Thompson's work, even Hempton admits this clear awareness of the tensions to be the genius of Thompson's work; Hempton stresses the positive side of the tensions, while Thompson identifies the problems (HEMPTON 1996: 196).

⁶ W.R. Ward notes the importance of the "priesthood of all believers" in unsettling the status quo (WARD 1989: 303-27).

In the United States, already the beginnings of Methodism are located in a postcolonial situation (although Native Americans have reminded us that internal colonization continues). Note that the U.S. won its independence from Britain shortly before Methodism organized itself in 1784. Like capitalism, Methodism works better in a postcolonial situation, as the success stories of both Methodism and capitalism in the U.S. show. From the U.S., Methodism spread around the world in the wake of postcolonial expansions, adapting to the needs of new situations. In many ways it accommodated to newly emerging imperial interests in ways that turned on their head the anti-imperial traits of early Methodism. Its shifting attitudes toward slavery in the U.S. are telling: opposing slavery early on, Methodism later endorsed it. When the Monroe Doctrine was put forth in 1823, implying U.S. interests in Latin America, Methodism was quick to respond by setting up schools and other initiatives.⁷⁷ When the idea of Manifest Destiny was formulated in the middle of the nineteenth century, proclaiming that it was the God-given destiny of the U.S. to expand all the way to the Pacific Ocean, Methodism did not stand up in protest. Under the conditions of a “postcolonial empire,” the lack of a response is often sufficient. In situations of substantial power differentials it is not necessary to promote empire actively — not to resist the flow is enough. Any theological surplus will have to be identified between the lines, following the sort of ambivalence that is produced from below, shining through for instance in African American Methodism and in other places at the margins.

⁷⁷ The role of education is noted for instance by José Míguez Bonino (BONINO 2005: 199). This emphasis on education became the hallmark of Methodist missions (HEMPTON 1996: 157). Already in 1897 John R. Mott notes the importance of education missions in the context of India: “Educational missions have opened a larger number of doors for the preaching of the gospel than any other agency.” (MOTT 1897: 96).

Conclusions

Despite its location in the context of two empires — the British and the American — Methodism and its theology maintained a spirit of resistance. As Methodism became more established this spirit of resistance was increasingly subjected to the pressures and temptations of the *status quo* but it never faded out completely. As religion refuses to go “from the greatest to the least” a theological surplus emerges that remains worth being investigated. If it made a difference in its own time, it may still inspire us to make a difference today.

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