

Openness to Difference

The Essentials of Christianity

What beliefs should be expected of all United Methodists today? This is a difficult question that the denomination has avoided answering. Instead it has wisely talked about how it expects its members to think theologically and come to their own conclusions. This is the topic of the next chapter. But if we are to live and work together and identify the mission into which we are called by God, we need also to have some shared convictions. Is there a way of coming to the shared convictions we need without formulating a creed or confession that then functions to exclude some who legitimately disagree with its formulations? Can Wesley help us answer this question?

An answer will involve two steps. First, Wesleyans today, as in Wesley's day, are certainly expected to be Christian. Whatever is essential to being Christian is essential to being a Methodist. Second, Wesley had expectations of his own followers that he did not have of all Christians. There was something distinctive about being a Methodist. Does this mean that there are theological requirements on Methodists that go beyond what is essential to Christian belief generally? This first section deals with the first step; the second section will pursue the question of Methodist distinctiveness.

Wesley emphasized the distinction between what is essential in Christianity and "opinions." With regard to opinions Wesley taught that Christians should think and let think, respecting those who held different views. What did Wesley believe to be essential? It can plausibly be argued that Methodists today continue to be bound by whatever Wesley taught to be essential to Christianity.

Jerry L. Walls examines this question thoroughly in *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity*.¹ He provides a thoughtful and insightful examination of Wesley's distinction between essentials and matters of opinion. He then proceeds to argue that followers of Wesley are bound to traditional orthodoxy, accept-

ing all the ecumenical creeds. Indeed, he asserts that these should be adopted as juridical standards for teaching in the United Methodist Church. Freedom of opinion, or at least the right to express opinion, would then be markedly circumscribed.

Since Walls is writing with much the same purpose as I, and since both of us appeal to Wesley in our efforts to establish a basis for unity in United Methodism, it will be useful to examine his argument in more detail. Walls rightly notes that Wesley's examples of opinions on which differences are to be tolerated are generally those matters in dispute among different Christian bodies. He then points out correctly that for Wesley this did not mean indifferentism. Far from it. Doctrines of many sorts are very important to Wesley. Furthermore, as Wesley wrote in "Catholic Spirit": "A man of truly catholic spirit, has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine."² Thus far there is no question of Walls's accuracy.

At this point, however, Walls makes moves that I cannot follow. "Clearly," he writes "some doctrines are altogether non-negotiable for 'a man of truly catholic spirit.'"³ This interpretation is strengthened by what he calls a logical point. To believe one thing is to deny another. Hence, for Wesley to hold one set of beliefs must entail his rejecting others. Walls argues that "anyone who insists on any truth claim at all cannot embrace the principles of pluralism without thereby calling his own truth claim into question."⁴ He implies that Wesley's strong beliefs on many subjects made it impossible for him to be tolerant of contradictory beliefs.

Wesley's position is different from Walls's in a way that is quite significant. He agreed that it is very important to think as rigorously and accurately as possible. He had strong convictions for which he argued passionately. He also recognized the validity of the logical point noted by Walls. But one of the convictions deriving from this thinking of which he was most sure was that he, like everyone else, was mistaken in some opinions:

Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it) yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*—to be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some is the necessary condition of humanity. This therefore, he is sensible,

is his own case. He knows in the general that he is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes he does not, perhaps cannot, know.⁵

This point is made earlier in the same sermon from which Walls quotes Wesley's strong polemic against indifferentism. Like Walls, Wesley emphasized that to believe one thing excludes believing other contradictory ones. But he argued against erecting one's opinions into an orthodoxy required of others.

Walls carries his line of argument further when he refers back to the passage quoted earlier. "Traditional theology holds that the main branches of Christian doctrine are 'as fixed as the sun,' (Wesley)." Wesley's statement that the Catholic spirit is by no means a matter of vagueness in doctrine or lack of conviction is transformed into the position that the church has a set of official doctrines that are as fixed as the sun. It then remains only to identify what these are, and Walls proceeds to identify them with the classical creeds understood to be accurate summaries of Biblical teaching.

Wesley did not make these moves. In response to Walls it is important to note that for Wesley faith is not identical with the acceptance of any creed. In fact, Wesley minimized the importance of orthodoxy, which for him involved subscribing to the ecumenical creeds. In "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," he wrote that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all."⁶ As the preceding chapters have shown, Wesley's deepest concern was for the actual transformation of life. Beliefs were valued according to their contribution to this transformation. As long as it could be shown that a particular belief did not hinder this transformation, Wesley would allow it, even when he disagreed strongly.

It is equally important in understanding Wesley to see that he thought some beliefs were far better than others in accurately describing and encouraging the salvific process. He worked hard to hone his theology accordingly, and he was concerned that his preachers present their message accurately. He could accept believers in predestinationist doctrines in individual cases because these doctrines existed in them alongside the apparent work of the Spirit, but he preached against these doctrines all the same.

The beliefs that he found to be less relevant, and that he had chiefly in mind in his disparaging comments about "orthodoxy,"

were those that came out of the creeds and out of philosophical theology. Even though he accepted many of them himself and encouraged others to do so, he saw that they were not essential to Christian love. For example, it was profoundly important to him that Christ be experienced as savior and Lord, but he found that this experience was not dependent on traditional statements about Christ's two natures or a particular theory of the atonement. According to Randy Maddox, Wesley believed "that much of the historical debate over Christ's nature was simply unwarranted imposition of philosophical conceptions on the simply-expressed teachings of Scripture and the earliest church."⁷

A particularly interesting test case of Wesley's distinctions among beliefs is found in his sermon, "On the Trinity." He begins his sermon by emphasizing that "religion is not opinion: no, not right opinion, assent to one or to ten thousand truths. . . . Right opinion is as distant from religion as the east is from the west."⁸ He demonstrates this by showing that some Roman Catholics are devout Christians despite the many errors contained in their opinions. Even more remarkable to him is that there are Calvinists who are genuine Christians while believing that "the God of love, the wise, just, merciful Father of the spirits of all flesh, has from eternity fixed an absolute, unchangeable, irresistible decree that part of mankind shall be saved, do what they will, and the rest damned, do what they can!"⁹

Still there are some truths very closely connected with vital religion. Among these is the one contained in his text: 1 John 5:7, "There are three that bear record in heaven, The Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (KJV). Having stated strongly that this comes close to the Christian essence, Wesley immediately emphasized the distinction between facts and their explanations. He thought the Athanasian creed the best attempt at explanation, but he denied that explanation is needed or even truly possible. He did not encourage efforts to understand. Further, one is not required to use the language "Trinity" at all, or speak of three Persons, since this is not biblical. Wesley even defended the formulation of Servetus, the hero of the Unitarians, as acceptable.

This might sound as though Wesley simply called for literal acceptance of whatever is said in the Bible, whether or not it makes sense or has importance for Christian life. But the conclusion of the sermon shows that this is not his point. "I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer . . . till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God

the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son—and having this witness he honours the Son and the blessed Spirit ‘even as he honours the Father.’”¹⁰ For Wesley, the God we encounter in the inward working of the Holy Spirit and in the outward working of Jesus Christ is one and the same as the God whom we know as the Father. To deny this would be to block the path to Christian love.

The beliefs that are required in support of Christian life and experience in addition to the Trinitarian point just made chiefly focus on salvation. It is essential to recognize our profound need for justifying and regenerating grace¹¹ as well as the actuality and availability of that grace. It is equally important to acknowledge that we are called by God to holiness of life and that grace enables us to grow into that holiness. Failure to accept these beliefs blocks the working of the Holy Spirit within us.¹²

We need a fourfold distinction. First, there is the actual transformative work of God in human life. This is the essence. Second, some teachings about this work support and further it; others block or inhibit it. The latter are forbidden, and instruction in the former is emphasized. Third, there is a body of theology which Wesley saw as very important and on which he had very strong convictions (his opposition to predestination, for example), with regard to which he nevertheless acknowledged that those who disagreed with him could also be authentic believers. And, finally, there are a number of traditional church teachings (on such matters as how the persons of the Trinity are related one to another, for example) to which Wesley personally subscribed but which did not seem to him to make much difference with regard to actual Christian life. Of emphasis on these he often spoke disparagingly, although this certainly did not mean that rejecting traditional formulations was preferable to accepting them.

The Essence of Methodism

The essence of Christianity is the transformative work of the Holy Spirit which Wesley usually expresses in terms of love of God and neighbor, understanding by “neighbor” all human beings. To be a Methodist is, without doubt, to be one who opens oneself to the working of love in the heart by the Holy Spirit. But Wesley believed this was true for all Christians and not for Methodists alone. It does not define the Methodist movement.

To be a part of this movement included requirements that went beyond being authentically Christian. It involved, especially, faithful participation in the Methodist meetings and a willingness to accept the disciplines involved. Did it also require the adoption of particular beliefs not required of all Christians? Are there theological requirements for being Wesleyan that go beyond those for being Christian?¹³

There can be no doubt that Wesley expected his lay preachers to follow his own lead closely. He wanted them to think, but if their thinking took them too far away from his own views, he was far from content. They were to present a united front. When disagreements or uncertainties arose, these were to be worked out at their annual meetings with him, and his word carried. In short, their preaching was to be an extension of his own.

This close control of what the Methodist preachers did was related to the nature of Methodism at the time. Its preachers were not professionally trained or ordained. They were Wesley's helpers in the development of Wesley's movement. One became a Methodist preacher because one wanted to extend Wesley's work. What happened in the movement was Wesley's responsibility. In Wesley's own view and intention, Methodism was not a church, a denomination, or even a sect. Hence this close control over what Methodist preachers then did is not a model for what should happen once Methodism became a denomination.

One way in which Wesley sought to ensure that his message would be preached in the movement he had instituted was through the "Model Deed," which contained a clause designed to make certain that those preaching in the new chapels and preaching houses would "preach no doctrine contrary to" that contained in Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his *Sermons*. This restriction remained in force when legal ownership of the properties passed from Wesley to the British Methodist Conference. Although the restriction of the "Model Deed" has no legal status in American churches, many believe that it should apply to preaching in the United Methodist Church as well.

Would this mean that, however open Christianity as a whole may be to doctrinal differences, United Methodists are bound to Wesley's own position on the issues that distinguished his theology from others? In some sense this is surely the case. What Wesley wanted preached by his followers was what *he* understood to be the gospel. Those who understood the gospel quite differently should preach

under other auspices. He recognized their right to do so and respected them. But there was no reason that one who proclaimed predestination, for example, should do so as a Methodist preacher.

Our question now is, How restrictive is this for us? Are we bound to continue to preach Wesley's distinctive doctrines of faith, assurance, and sanctification? Certainly in United Methodism we have not done so. Is the way forward a renewal of Wesley's teaching? Specifically, should we attempt juridically to enforce this kind of preaching?

The previous chapters have suggested one answer. We should engage in dialogue with Wesley on these matters. By ignoring his distinctive emphases we have lost much. On the other hand, his own position did not remain static throughout his life, and it would be impossible to be consistent with everything he said. It would be totally out of keeping with Wesley to repeat particular formulations when these do not correspond either to lived experience or to the best current biblical scholarship. To be faithful to the standard doctrines taught by Wesley involves continuing study of the Bible and attention to the realities of Christian experience in our time.

To follow Wesley's standard doctrines in our preaching is not primarily a matter of dealing with his most controversial and problematic teachings. It is primarily a matter of representing the essentials of the Christian faith as he did, calling always for the love of God and neighbor, and evaluating all doctrines in terms of their relation to this. Even if we were to accept the moral authority of the "Model Deed," this cannot support the credalization of United Methodism.

Insofar as there are specifications of what constitutes Methodist doctrine beyond what is essential to Christians generally, they apply to what is to be preached. Wesley wanted consistency in the preaching, but he did not make detailed agreement a requirement of membership. He wanted as wide a latitude as possible with regard to opinions to be allowed within Methodism. In "The Character of a Methodist" he stated that "the distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. . . . As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."¹⁴

This formulation still leaves unclear what the root of Christianity is. Some might define it as including a considerable range of doctrines, but in his letter "To John Newton" (May 14, 1765), he states that he allows for any opinion which is "compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace" and explains that the only inquiries he

makes of applicants to his societies are these: "Is a man a believer in Jesus Christ, and is his life suitable to his profession?"¹⁵

John Newton was especially concerned that Wesley excluded those who adopted Calvinist views of particular election and final perseverance. This was because Wesley had described the consequences of these doctrines in harsh terms as inimical to Christian living. Wesley replied that it is enough that Newton held these views to prove that they are not incompatible with love of Christ and a work of grace. In short, the test for membership in a society was not the dangerous implications that Wesley discerned in these doctrines but how they actually worked out in an individual human life. The real requirement for membership was not beliefs at all, but Christian love.

This could be interpreted sentimentally, so that it would have no teeth at all. That would be the danger today. But Wesley did not interpret Christian love sentimentally. For him it was a mode of being that could occur only through the work of the Spirit in repentance and faith. There could be no Christian love that did not express itself in costly works. Only those who showed signs of being and living in this way were accepted.

Today many speak of orthopraxis instead of orthodoxy. This is not enough for Wesley. Orthopraxis might mean works that could occur apart from repentance and faith. For Wesley these are not Christian. Wesley wanted the fruits of the Spirit, not outwardly good actions that are motivated by something other than love. Hence faith was essential for him.

Wesley's definition of the essence of Christianity was not uncontroversial at the time. It is not uncontroversial today. But if the United Methodist Church wants to regain a clear identity, Wesley's distinctions suggest the direction in which that identity could be most appropriately sought. This would require hard work in clarifying how we today understand Christian existence and Christian activity. Would it be possible to come to sufficient clarity that we could present to our membership and to persons who might be interested in joining us a clear picture of our contemporary Wesleyan understanding of the Christian life?

If we could recover and renew Wesley's emphasis on faith, works, and love, modified as appropriate, and could agree that this is the work of the Holy Spirit who can open our eyes to an awareness of the Spirit's work, and to the importance to that work of God's work

in Jesus Christ, our account of the Christian life would not be far from Wesley's. This would be especially true if we show how there can be growth in the Christian life as well as falling away, how and why this is so, and how in our fellowship we support one another in working toward fuller love. We could proceed to describe the anticipated fruits of the Spirit and the work we do individually and collectively to express those fruits, especially love.

Today this account would have to be psychologically convincing. It would have to describe what some are actually experiencing and that to which others aspire. We would have to show that what we do together in the church in worship and education and shared action genuinely exemplifies and furthers the account we render of ourselves. We would have to present this whole account in a way that showed awareness of the many and diverse obstacles that block the way to the experience of grace, and the complexities of the public and global problems that impinge on individual life. To follow Wesley in this way would not be an avoidance of theological work—far from it!—but it would channel that work in a particular direction, namely, the direction in which Wesley channelled his. We could work together on clarifying our purposes without having first agreed on any confession or creed. But we would know that theological issues of many sorts would arise as we worked on our clarification of Christian experience and action today.

We would also know that there would be disagreements among us on these theological issues. We would not all agree on which teachings furthered and which impeded the life of Christian love. We would not all agree on how far we could go to allow a place within the denomination for those whose opinions strongly conflict with ours, as Wesley allowed predestinationists in his movement. We would disagree about whether philosophy is useful or harmful in the formulation of our beliefs and, if useful, which philosophy is best to use. We would bring different life experiences as women and men, as old and young, as members of many different ethnic groups from many different cultural backgrounds, that would lead to ranges of disagreement which would have amazed Wesley. And we would differ in our appreciation and appropriation of contemporary biblical scholarship and the historical relativization of past expressions of faith.

But all these disagreements would have for us a different character if we united in our commitment to encourage and embody

Christian love in our life together. We would find some arguments fruitful in promoting this goal, leading to learning from one another and growing in mutual appreciation. The next chapter on the quadrilateral will discuss the norms in terms of which such arguments can be conducted by contemporary Wesleyans.

We would find other arguments useless and even harmful, and we would seek to avoid them. We might understand one who would not set these aside as a heretic in Wesley's sense, that is, one who "obstinately persists in contending about foolish questions, and thereby occasions strifes and animosities, schisms and parties in the church."¹⁶ Heretics in this sense do not belong within the Wesleyan movement, for they do not promote its purposes.

Some questions that Wesley minimized might turn out to be more important for us. For example, Wesley was emphatic that Christian faith depends on the belief *that* Jesus Christ has won our pardon, but he thought that it is not necessary to hold any theory about *how* he has done so. He frequently makes similar points. Often this is a liberating approach.

But when, through the course of changing sensibilities and advancing scholarship, the *that* becomes problematic for many, the issue of exactly *what* is being claimed gains importance. What does it mean that Jesus has won our pardon? To refuse to give some clarification of this assertion is to generate increasing skepticism about it. But any clarification will move in the direction of *how*.

Furthermore, much of importance often follows from the *how*. *How* Jesus saves us affects the question of whether this salvation is effective for those who have never heard of him. Does Jesus' work as savior preclude there being others who have worked salvifically in other religious communities? Does Jesus' salvation have to do only with the forgiveness of sins and healing our sin-diseased souls, or can it have the still wider meaning discussed in Chapters 1 and 6?

Wesley can remain our guide here: we need to press such questions only to the extent that they affect our lives. And we can allow a diversity of answers, testing each against its contribution to the support and strengthening of love of God and neighbor. But we must also ask whether the differences affect the way that love expresses itself in action. Theology of this sort may prove *more* important than Wesley realized.

Religious Pluralism

At the same time that Wesley gave a clear definition to his movement, in terms of life more than doctrine, he also encouraged a spirit of appreciation and cooperation in relation to persons in other communities. He was, therefore, pluralistic not only in his openness to diversities of opinions within the Methodist movement, but also in acknowledging that God worked in other contexts as well, and that this work, too, is to be affirmed and celebrated.

Many of the points made above in explaining Wesley's openness to diverse opinions among Methodists imply also an accepting and affirming attitude toward other Christians. Certainly one would not demand more agreement in opinions with them than among Methodists. Wesley spelled this out emphatically in a sermon on the "Catholic Spirit." Here is his famous text, taken from 2 Kings 10:15, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand" (KJV).¹⁷

Wesley, of course, did not derive from this a sentimental notion of mutual appreciation. On the contrary, for one's heart to be right is to love God with all one's mind, heart, soul, and strength and one's neighbor as oneself. It is to have a very particular love for all who share this Christian love. And this love is expressed in action.

He contrasted this shared love with all of those doctrines, forms of church governance, forms of worship, and views of the sacraments, that in fact divided Christians and led to mutual animosities. Each Christian should have strong views on these matters and should participate actively in that particular church which from that point of view is most faithful. But this is no reason to reject fellowship with those who identify with other Christian groups. What is essential is Christian love and that alone.

Wesley primarily had other Protestant groups in mind in this sermon, but what he said applied to Roman Catholics as well. He fully recognized this. He sought to cooperate with Catholics in mutual support just as with other Protestants. In his "Letter to a Roman Catholic," out of his distress over conflicts in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, he wrote as follows:

I do not suppose that all the bitterness is on your side. I know there is too much on our side also; so much, that I fear many Protestants (so called) will be angry at me too, for writing to you in this manner; and will say, 'It is showing you too much favour; you

deserve no such treatment at our hands.'

But I think you do. I think you deserve the tenderest regard I can show, were it only because the same God hath raised you and me from the dust of the earth, and has made us both capable of loving and enjoying him to eternity; were it only because the Son of God has bought you and me with his own blood. How much more, if you are a person fearing God (as without question many of you are), and studying to have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man?¹⁸

After depicting Protestant faith in an irenic way so as to reduce Catholic hostility, Wesley concluded:

In the name, then, and in the strength of God, let us resolve, first, not to hurt one another; to do nothing unkind or unfriendly to each other, nothing which we would not have done to ourselves. Rather let us endeavour after every instance of a kind, friendly and Christian behaviour towards each other.

Let us resolve, secondly, God being our helper, to speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other. The sure way to avoid this is to say all the good we can both of and to one another; in all our conversation, either with or concerning each other, to use only the language of love. . . .

Let us, thirdly, resolve to harbour no unkind thought, no unfriendly temper, towards each other. . . .

Let us, fourthly, endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the kingdom.¹⁹

These positions of Wesley were unusual for his time. They are, indeed, still unusual in ours. There is little need here to distinguish between Wesley's own formulations and their relevance for today.

On the other hand, concern for those who disagree religiously has expanded in scope. Relationships with persons of other religious traditions have become far more important than in Wesley's day. Wesley does not provide as much direct help in dealing with this matter as with the others. Nevertheless, even here he is surprisingly relevant.

In his sermon "A Caution Against Bigotry,"²⁰ he focused on works. His text was Mark 9:38-39, where John asks whether the disciples should stop those not connected with them from casting out devils in Jesus' name. Jesus says: "Forbid them not." Wesley interpreted casting out devils as overcoming the power of evil, wherever and however that may occur. Unlike the sermon on

"Catholic Spirit," this one does not raise the question of the inner motive but focuses on public results.

The text implies that the exorcist is in some way related to Jesus, hence, in application to Wesley's time, a Christian. The issue is whether Christians should support the constructive work of other Christians even if they are in opposing camps or lack proper credentials. As is to be expected, Wesley said they should, and he pressed this to the limits, including Roman Catholics. Indeed, he even included those who were regarded as heretics, such as Arians and Socinians.

Wesley was carried still farther by the logic of his argument. If the work that is done advances God's cause, it does not matter that the actor is not a Christian at all. "Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a deist, or a Turk doing the same thing, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly I should be no better than a bigot still."²¹

The implication is clear. What binds Christians together in unity is their love of God and neighbor. Wesley connected this indissolubly with the work of Christ. But he did not limit God's working in the world to overcome the power of evil to Christians. God may use others. Christians should be open to seeing that and where this occurs. And when it does happen, Christians are to affirm and support it.

For Wesley this was somewhat hypothetical. For us, it is not. It is obvious that God does much good through secular humanists (our equivalent of deists), through Jews, and through Muslims. Christian ecumenical bodies such as the World Council (and before that the International Missionary Council) have long called for cooperation in good works not only with these groups but with Buddhists, Hindus, and others as well. What were prophetic words in Wesley's day are now commonplaces.

One more point can be made about Wesley in relation to other cultures and religious traditions. He rarely spoke negatively of the others in order to show the greatness of Christianity. This is important. Christians from New Testament times on have disparaged and even vilified Judaism in order to show the newness and salvific importance of Christianity. This was not Wesley's style. His contrast was between authentic Christianity and the inauthentic forms that paraded in its name in the British Isles.

It is true that one of the ways of condemning his fellow English-

men who had the outward form of godliness without the true religion of the heart was to say they are no better than Jews or Turks. Clearly the assumption here is that Jews and Turks also lack the heartfelt love of God and neighbor that is the reality of the regenerate life. There is little basis for building positive doctrines of Judaism or Islam on Wesley's usual silence and occasional, glancing comments. But it remains the case that Wesley did not build up Christianity by putting down other religious traditions. Indeed, on occasion he could assert the superiority of heathens in comparison with most of those who called themselves Christians. For example, in "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VIII," in discussing the command not to lay up treasures upon earth, he stated:

With regard to most of the commandments of God, whether relating to the heart or life, the heathens of Africa or America stand much on a level with those that are called Christians. . . . At least the American has not much the advantage. But we cannot affirm this with regard to the command now before us. Here the heathen has far the pre-eminence."²²

He sometimes affirmed that it would be preferable to "convert the English into honest heathens."²³

In "A Caution Against Bigotry" there seems to be an exception. In his discussion of casting out demons Wesley made a distinction. Outside of Christendom he noted that crude forms of idolatry persist accompanied by gross immorality. He gave details of vicious practices in Native American tribes near the British colony of Georgia. In such contexts, he thought, the sort of casting out of demons recounted in the New Testament might continue. In contrast, within Christendom, where public morality was not so degraded, the devil must adopt subtler and more sophisticated strategies. Demon possession was a thing of the past. Pride and skepticism were more likely to be the way the devil won his battles.

The picture here of the pagan world is indeed an ugly one, so that Wesley came close to celebrating Christianization as a great advance.²⁴ The implications for other religious traditions could be very negative. But Wesley did not move in this direction. Immediately after recounting the horrors of pagan life he wrote:

It were to be wished that none but heathens had practised such gross, palpable works of the devil. But we dare not say so. Even in cruelty and bloodshed, how little have the Christians come behind

them! And not the Spaniards or Portuguese alone, butchering thousands in South America. Not the Dutch only in the East Indies, or the French in North America, following the Spaniards step by step. Our own countrymen, too, have wantoned in blood, and exterminated whole nations: plainly proving thereby what spirit it is that dwells and works in the children of disobedience.²⁵

Today we might object that the Europeans were far *ahead* of the Native Americans in cruelty and bloodshed! And we would want to emphasize how much of this destruction was carried on in the name of Christianity. But at least Wesley did not celebrate Christian civilization or use its virtues to justify the conquest of the Americas and the slaughter of their inhabitants. In comparing Christianity with the other great world religions, we could expect him to judge Christians as harshly as any and to acknowledge goodness where he found it.

Although issues about the relation of Christianity to Judaism were far less in the public discussion in Wesley's day than now, Wesley made some valuable suggestions on this topic too. Far from contrasting the Old Testament and the New in terms of their basic understanding of salvation, he emphasized their unity. For example, he argued that Paul did not oppose the covenant given by Moses to the covenant given by Christ. In his sermon on "The Righteousness of Faith," in reference to Romans 10:5-8, Wesley wrote: "It is the covenant of *grace* which God through Christ hath established with men in all ages (as well before, and under, the Jewish dispensation, as since God was manifest in the flesh), which St. Paul here opposes to the covenant of *works*, made with Adam while in paradise."²⁶ Since Paul associates "Jews" with the covenant of works, Wesley explained that this was true of some Jews just as of many other people. This leaves open the possibility that some Jews, just as some Christians, may live righteously under the covenant of grace.

Randy Maddox has shown that in his later years Wesley went further in his reflections on nonChristians. He explicitly rejected the belief that God could and would save no one apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ. When preparing Articles of Religion for American Methodists, he deleted Anglican Article XVIII, "Of Obtaining Eternal Salvation Only by the Name of Christ." He could not believe that God condemned to eternal punishment those who had no opportunity to respond to the gospel. In Maddox's words, Wesley taught that "God will judge the heathens with some discrimination after all; not directly in terms of their appropriation or rejection of Christ, but in

terms of how they respond to the gracious revelation (light) that they do receive."²⁷ For example, in his sermon "On Charity," Wesley wrote:

How it will please God, the Judge of all, to deal with *them* [those to whom the gospel is not preached] we may leave to God himself. But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the heathens also; that he is 'rich in mercy to all that call upon him', 'according to the light they have'; and that 'in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him.'²⁸

Of course, the gracious revelation received by those to whom the gospel has not been preached is the work of the Holy Spirit that is in fact, in Wesley's view, derived from the atoning work of Christ.

Wesleyans and Religious Pluralism Today

Wesley's few words on other religious traditions do not constitute a "theology of religions" for today. He did not face our situation or raise the questions that press themselves on our attention. In his own situation his views pushed forward the frontiers of toleration, and even support, of those who are different. But transposed directly into our situation, the same doctrines could easily become reactionary. For example, unqualified statements about the necessity of the atoning work of Jesus Christ for salvation seem to imply that other religious traditions have no religiously positive function. To make those statements today, in our much more religiously pluralistic context, would be reactionary.

One possible Wesleyan position is, nevertheless, to emphasize Wesley's statements about the dependence of divine pardon on Jesus' atoning work. One can then drop Wesley's qualifications, including the suggestions that this atonement is from the foundations of the world and hence effective even for those who lived before the time of Jesus and for those who do not know him. One could then argue that apart from conscious faith in Jesus, one cannot be saved. This would draw out the apparent implications of some of Wesley's statements in directions he was unwilling to follow.

A second possible position for Wesleyans is to emphasize the universal availability of forgiveness even to those who do not know of the atoning work of Christ.²⁹ Those who live by the light they receive are graciously justified. This applies to Jews, from whom we

received the teaching of love of God and love of human beings, and among whom such love is to be found. But the fruits of the Spirit can be found in other communities as well. It is the presence of such fruits and not conscious beliefs that testify to salvation.

A third Wesleyan position would be to seek the shared essence of the great religious traditions more openmindedly, instead of assuming that it must be the same as the Christian one. John Hick has made an influential proposal of this sort.³⁰ He argues that all of the great religious traditions effect in their devoted believers a shift from centeredness on the self to centeredness on what he calls "the Real." In the theistic traditions this is centering on God through love or obedience or surrender. In Hinduism it is overcoming the ego in the discovery that the true self is one with ultimate reality, or Brahman. In Buddhism it occurs through liberation from the illusion of the reality of the self and thus of its separation from other things.

A Wesleyan could agree with Hick that what is truly essential is this transformation or fundamental reorientation. Much of what Wesley said about fellowship and unity with those who loved God and human beings could then be said about those who were thus transformed. Strongly as the Wesleyan would continue to affirm the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, these, too, would become part of the range of opinions on which difference is possible without breaking fellowship.

While I recognize the validity of all of these moves, none are quite satisfactory to me. I favor a move that may seem a sharper break from Wesley's approach. This fourth Wesleyan approach emphasizes deep differences instead of essential identities. In defense of this as a Wesleyan approach, I begin by noting that Wesley did see Christianity as very different from other religious traditions even if he did not think much about the differences. Had he found this topic important, as it clearly is today, he would probably have studied each tradition openly and honestly to learn what it had to say. It would not have been important to him to find that all the traditions embodied a common essence. My thesis is that students who are not motivated by that quest are likely to be more impressed by the differences.

My second step is to claim that when one studies these traditions openly and honestly with no need to identify a common essence and no disposition to assume that they are without value, one is impressed by the authenticity of the experiences they embody and the

wisdom of the insights they have generated. Sometimes Christians who come across these achievements are stimulated to recall similar experience and similar wisdom embodied in their own tradition. They are enabled to revitalize these and gain new appreciation for them. On the other hand, unless they are determined to claim that the Christian tradition contains all worthwhile experience and all wisdom, they are often also impressed that they are encountering something that is new. In short, the fact that these traditions are deeply different from Christianity and from one another does not mean that they are without distinctive value.

A third step is to suggest that although differences sometimes involve contradictions, they do not always do so. Even when there are strict contradictions in the doctrines that give expression or support to diverse experiences and insights, this does not entail that the experiences and insights are themselves contradictory. The Buddhist experience of no-self does not contradict the Christian experience of loving one's neighbor as oneself, even though the teachings suggested by the two experiences are likely to contain such contradictions. If, with Wesley, we distinguish the experience from the associated opinions, we are likely to be able to modify the latter so that they cease to contradict one another without reducing the differences among them.

A fourth step is to propose that the encounter with other religious traditions is an occasion for both teaching and learning. Since our Christian tradition has wisdom that is unique, we should not hold back from proclaiming it. But this does not preclude the possibility that we can gain much of value by listening to the Muslim or the Hindu.

A fifth step is to assert that Christianity from the first has had this character. It has never supposed that the whole of saving truth and wisdom were its possession. The fullness of salvation lies in the hoped-for future rather than in the past or present. Now we see dimly as in a mirror, but then face to face. What we receive from Jesus is the openness to God's Spirit that leads into the fullness of truth. To learn from the Spirit is not to surrender faith in Christ but to embody it ever more deeply.

A sixth step is to affirm that in fact Christians have learned from Stoics and Neo-Platonists and Aristotelians. We have learned from modern science, from historians, from psychologists, and from feminists. Christianity is not true to itself when it tries to display its own

strength by defending itself against alien wisdom. Its true strength lies in its weakness, manifest in its openness to learn. It is healthiest and most vital when it boldly appropriates the best that it finds in its world and integrates that with what it has brought from its own past. What is "best" it learns from Christ.

The seventh step, then, is to rejoice that there is now a new range of cultures and religions that can contribute to our understanding. Their history is so different from ours, it expresses itself in ways that are so challenging and so diverse, that the task of learning will take a long time. But as it proceeds we will advance another long step toward that fullness of truth that we can associate only with the eschaton.

This is not Wesley's doctrine. It presupposes a kind of historical consciousness that emerged for the first time in the nineteenth century. And it presupposes a world in which other religious communities are a part of the common experience, a world that emerged only in the twentieth century. A truly Wesleyan doctrine today should take all this into account, just as he was deeply sensitive to the life around him and took into account the best scholarship of his own time. But it is pointless to say that this is what Wesley would do if he were alive today. Wesley would not be Wesley if he were alive today. I recommend it only as one form of a Wesleyan theology of religion appropriate for our time.