

BOOK NOTES

An Introduction to World Methodism
Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White

New York: Cambridge University Press

2005, 298 pp., paper, \$24.99

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

Employing a broad ecumenical lens, Cracknell and White attempt to offer the serious reader an introduction to the history, theology, spirituality, worship, and social ethics of Methodism. Their goal is not only to bring about greater understanding among Methodists from a diversity of backgrounds such that they might exclaim, “Ah! Now I see why they do things differently over there!” but also to engage non-Methodists who as a consequence might reply, “Ah! So that’s what makes Methodists tick.”

Sensitive to the problems caused by the hagiographies of John and Charles Wesley and the triumphalistic accounts of Methodism that have been a part of the tradition, the authors attempt to avoid any suggestion that Methodism is a “normative pattern for all Christians,” nor are they crying “back to Wesley.” Such an approach, however, may be an over-reaction to some very real problems in past historical method. For one thing, the heart of historic Methodism ever embraced a reforming impulse in terms of the inculcation of holy love in an abundance of graces. Such a concern, which is at the heart of Scriptural Christianity as well, is as relevant today as it was in the eighteenth century—and across a diversity of social locations. Indeed, even in his own day, John Wesley recognized some common elements that bear mentioning: people whether in England, Georgia, Holland or Antigua are united in their sin; they are also, therefore, united in their need for grace.

Though this work has many strengths, especially in its social and cultural analysis of what is termed “revivalist” and “mahogany” Methodism, its theological forays are at times interrupted by factual error. To illustrate, the authors claim that beyond the letter of John Wesley to his brother Samuel Wesley, Jr. in October 1738, “there is no other reference in any of his copious writings to what has come to be called the ‘Aldersgate

experience.” However, Wesley specifically referred to May 24, 1738 over seven years later in a missive to “John Smith” on December 30, 1745. Beyond this, though the authors insist that Wesley’s confidence in himself never faltered after April 1739, once again the primary evidence paints a much different picture as revealed in the very depressing, though frank, letter from John to his brother, Charles in 1766. Add to these factual errors a number of other missteps, especially in terms of the temporal elements entailed in entire sanctification as Wesley himself had expressed them, and the reader can readily discern that it might have been better, after all, for these authors to have gone “back to Wesley.”

Methodism: Empire of the Spirit

David Hempton

New Haven: Yale University Press

2005, 304 pp., paper, \$18.00

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

David Hempton, University Professor at Boston University, has written a fresh, lively and carefully researched work on Methodism as an international movement that compares quite favorably with earlier, larger attempts. Recognizing that Methodism was the most important religious development since the Reformation, Hempton contends that by the nineteenth century, Methodism had helped to create a formidable empire of the spirit.

For those who only have a smattering of knowledge of Methodism this movement can appear to be quite baffling at times, and under researched caricatures have unfortunately emerged. To correct this tendency, Hempton rightly focuses on eight “dialectical frictions” that not only become the chapter headings of the book (“competition and symbiosis,” “enlightenment and enthusiasm,” for example) but also help to portray the variegated and sophisticated nature of Methodism. Accordingly, Chapter Two, Enlightenment and Enthusiasm, is especially good in that it portrays Methodism’s emphasis on life in the Holy Spirit and its proclivity for instantaneous conversion against the backdrop of Anglicanism’s ruling episcopacy, Bishop Gibson in particular, who took exception to the jump and stir of Methodist “enthusiasm” and much preferred to view the Christian faith, as do so many mainline folk today, as “a gradual improvement of grace and goodness, along with the disciplined practice of moral duties.”

Though the topic of conversion is clearly out of vogue with many

contemporary researchers who much prefer to view the entire Christian life as a “conversion,” thereby emptying the term of much of its meaning, Hempton is good enough a historian not to confuse his own social location, with all its preferences and judgments, with eighteenth and nineteenth century realities. Thus this gifted scholar accurately notes that the preaching careers of most early Methodist preachers began with “keenly remembered conversion narratives,” that in a real sense were part of an existential continuum that did not shy away from the reality of death. Indeed, conversion and death were points on a linear scale and “everything in between had its real meaning within those coordinates.” Put another way, dying well, and in an abundance of grace, was the mark of an early Methodist.

Though *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* is characterized by a much needed balance in so many areas, it does struggle at times to discern the level of sophistication that characterized early Methodist theology, a theology that not only emerged from the pen and hymns of John and Charles Wesley, but also arose in the give and take of the early Methodist Conferences. Thus, Hempton’s description of Methodist spirituality as focusing on the “need for human beings to take control of their spiritual destinies,” lacks the balance and careful nuance, the “dialectical frictions” that should be evident here as well. But despite this reservation, it must be readily noted that Hempton has written a work that will likely be well received by those both within and without Methodism, for it casts light on this dynamic and animated movement, a movement that once was a veritable empire of the spirit.

Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities

Roger E. Olson

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press

2006, 250 pp., paper, \$25.00

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

Demonstrating that the recent offerings in the field of evangelical/Arminian scholarship constitute not a fad but a trend, Roger Olson has written a carefully researched work that aptly portrays Arminian theology at its best. Maintaining that Arminianism is so rarely understood and commonly misrepresented—since many Calvinist critics have “wittingly or unwittingly borne false witness against Arminius and Arminianism,”—this gifted author clears away many of the stereotypes and half-truths (such as Arminianism is Pelagian or at best semi-Pelagian), that have remained much too long. This task is accomplished in part by examining the writings

of Arminius, Simon Episcopius, Philip Limborch, John Wesley as well as those of nineteenth and twentieth century theologians.

By examining and then debunking ten key myths surrounding Arminian theology (such as the heart of Arminianism is belief in free will or that Arminian theology denies the sovereignty of God) Olson cogently makes his case not only that Arminian theology is a legitimate form of Protestant orthodoxy, but also that Arminianism is a “legitimate evangelical theological option.” As a consequence of this argument Arminians “should not be ashamed to wear the title proudly.” With an eye on the current state of relations between evangelical Arminians and Calvinists, Olson concludes the work with four key rules of engagement for these evangelical cousins who have been distant at times, but who may actually have more in common than some of the heated polemics of the past have suggested. This is timely, splendidly written work, unparalleled in many respects, and therefore warrants a careful reading by both Calvinist and Arminian alike.

Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act

Mark W. T. Harvey

Seattle: University of Washington Press

2005, 325 pp., cloth, \$35.00

Reviewed by Frances S. Adeney

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The *Wilderness Act*—sounds political. *Wilderness Forever*—sounds environmentally driven. This book describes both—the political process and negotiations involved in securing for the American people nationally-designated wilderness areas, and the environmentally driven Howard Zahniser, the man who worked tirelessly for over twenty-five years for an act of congress that secured “an enduring resource of wilderness” through congressional designation of federally-owned areas as “wilderness areas” (*Wilderness Act* p.iv).

What becomes immediately apparent, upon embarking on this journey through reading *Wilderness Forever*, is that both the battle and the environmental vigor were intensely spiritual for Howard Zahniser. Beginning his career with the Bureau of Biological Survey and the Department of the Interior, Zahniser’s wilderness writing and political lobbying included writing for *Nature* magazine and editing *Living Wilderness*, the magazine of the Wilderness Society. As manager of the Wilderness Society in Washington D.C. for over two decades, Zahniser developed his

conviction that the time spent in the wilderness was both healing and personally transforming formed the central conviction that drove his political and organizational work (91). “He believed that wilderness was part of the eternal and an essential part of American society and culture” (5).

That belief grew through Zahniser’s boyhood, spent on the banks of the Allegheny River in a family of devoted Free Methodists who were serious about both mission work and issues of politics and social problems (11). Building upon the leadership models of his pastor father and missionary-minded mother, Zahniser came to see the safeguarding of wilderness areas as his lifelong task.

Toward that end he focused his skills as an activist and leader, bringing a generosity and understanding attitude to supporters and opponents alike. He could appreciate cities and revel in farmlands and fields of corn but the wilderness was “so remote from the artificial distractions of all our machines and routine contrivances,” that it took on an intensely human quality for Zahniser (91).

As the preservation of one wilderness area after another came under attack during the economic boom following the Great Depression, Zahniser and his coworkers realized that a more all-encompassing approach to preservation of wilderness areas was needed. The timber and forest products industry posed the first threat during those years but other threats to the wilderness were proliferating. As lumber interests battled over the boundaries of Olympic National Park in 1947, oil-drilling possibilities threatened the Ponderosa Pine forest area of the Teton National Forest.

Beginning a comprehensive and positive campaign for “saving” wilderness areas, Zahniser quoted Reinhold Niebuhr’s speech at the Assemble of World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948: “There is so little health in the whole of our modern civilization that one cannot find the island of order from which to proceed against disorder.” For Zahniser, the wilderness became that “island of order”, a base of reference for American society (99). He developed a comprehensive statement on the values of wilderness that was published by the Legislative Reference Service in 1949.

As he continued to give testimony for wilderness protection of specific areas, working to prevent dam construction in the New York Adirondacks and Echo Park on the borders of Utah and Colorado, Zahniser began to realize how permeable those areas were to both industry and government intervention (114). Between 1947 and 1953, Zahniser spent time in many American wilderness areas and became familiar not only with varieties of beauty experienced among them but also the management dilemmas they posed. Not only boundary protection was necessary, but land inside of the boundaries need to be healed. Overgrazing in Southwest wilderness

areas, the complicated issues of fire management in wilderness areas, and the task of preserving lands as a home for wild things called for more vigorous action.

He focused that action from the Wilderness Society office in Washington, D.C. where he worked to make the organization both more visible and more influential among lawmakers, agency officials, and the press. Getting wilderness on the nation's political and governmental agendas was the objective—a vision of a “healthful and pleasant world in which to live” was the long term goal. To that end he worked for preservation of special areas—areas designated as “wilderness areas.”

Mark Harvey tells the story of that work up to its fulfillment in the Wilderness Act of 1964, four months after Zahniser's death. Harvey repeatedly reminds the reader of the spiritual nature of Zahniser's work for wilderness preservation. “To Zahniser,” he writes, “wilderness was nature in its purest state, largely unaffected by human activity, where animals and plants thrived undisturbed, and where solitude reigned” (78). “Promoting the protection of animals and their habitat...the protection of wilderness, involved an ethic of stewardship toward God's creation that the Bible had taught him” (39).

Harvey's work is a fascinating read for those interested in how Christian convictions partner with environmental concerns and political action. It is well-researched and thoroughly documented, making it an excellent text for courses on environmental studies. Perhaps best of all, it is a fine tribute to a man whose determination, patience, and generous spirit inspires those who wish to serve both God and their country.