John Wesley and Liberation Theology: 
A Closer Look

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In many respects, the opening of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII in October, 1962, was the beginning of liberation theology. Indeed, the reforming energies of that council, expressed in its openness to the modern world and its problems, provided a favorable setting in which the frustrations of the poor and the disinherited could be addressed. This impetus for reform — what many in the Church were considering “a breath of fresh air” — continued in the call of Catholic bishops for a general conference in Medellín, Columbia, in 1968 to explore the poverty indigenous to Latin America. Medellín, in many ways the heir of Vatican II, has been deemed the womb of liberation theology because of its concern to evangelize the poor, to usher in a more just system of distribution of resources, and to give preference to the most needy.

Even though the roots of liberation theology are largely Latin American, many contemporary theologians, ranging from Allan Boesak to Kim Yong-Bok, insist that this way of doing theology must not be viewed simply as the prerogative of Latin America, but must be seen as a vital endeavor of the universal church. For their part, many Methodist theologians and ministers, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, have sought to appropriate the genius of the “new” theology, and to incorporate it within the larger Wesleyan tradition. For some, this task has been relatively easy, for others less so. But is the theology of John Wesley really a useful resource for, and is it compatible with, liberation theology? Moreover, are there any elements in this eighteenth-century theology that could possibly issue in a critique of contemporary liberation theology and praxis?

Since these two major theologies under consideration are highly developed and extensive, the method of this present essay will be to focus on a representative area of liberation theology, namely its definition of liberation itself, in order to determine whether or not Wesley’s theological conceptions and practice are, in fact, salutary.

I

Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru, whom many consider to be the principal Latin American theologian, maintains that liberation must be understood in a threefold sense. He writes:

First, liberation means freedom from oppressive economic, social and political conditions. Secondly, liberation means that human beings take
over control of their own historical destiny. Thirdly, liberation includes emancipation from sin and the acceptance of new life in Christ.¹

In the first area of liberation from oppressive economic, social and political conditions, the contribution of Wesley will be limited, chiefly due to the restrictive parameters of eighteenth-century political thought. Leon Hynson has argued cogently that the political thinking of the mature Wesley (1767-1782) revolved around the crucial issues of liberty and human rights. “Wesley believed that freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, right to property, freedom of movement and of life were secured through the Glorious Revolution,” ² and pertained to all English. A universal application of these same rights was also enunciated by Wesley in the specific relation he discerned between liberty, human rights and natural law. Here human rights were seen as imbedded in the very nature of things established by the Creator and were thus deemed inalienable. A corollary of this was that humans must be allowed the liberty to enjoy these rights guaranteed by God.

Moreover, although Wesley was an aggressive reformer, tackling the problems of unemployment, slavery, poverty, ignorance and war, his thought was, after all, more conducive to the liberal reform characteristic of his pre-Marxist age, for it lacked the kind of racial critique of institutional structures that has become the staple of liberation theology. In other words, although the father of Methodism was clearly a reformer, he was no revolutionary, and those theologians like Juan Segundo who closely identify Christianity and socialism will find little to feed upon in Wesley’s political thought. On the other hand, those theologians who insist on arguing for compatibility in this area, can do so only by ignoring the historical problem posed in the form of Marxist thought as a watershed in political and economic analysis.

II

To insure that the fruits of the Methodist revival would not be squandered, and to provide some structure which could channel reforming energies into English society, Wesley followed in the wake of such Pietists as Franke, Zinzendorf, William Law and his own father in emphasizing the place of religious societies in the discipline and renewal of Christian life. These small groups, these ecclesiola in ecclesia, were ranked according to spiritual progress and maturity. Thus, the United Societies consisted of all awakened persons; the Bands included those who knew their sins were forgiven, and the Select Societies embraced only those who appeared to walk in the light of God.

At first glance it may seem as if these eighteenth-century communities, created for both personal and social reform, are quite similar to the comunidades eclesiales de base or Christian base communities which have arisen within the context of Latin American liberation theology. But there are some important differences to be noted. First, the whole structure of Wesley’s United Societies is reflective of the ordo salutis as seen in the spiritual progression from society to band to select society. But the ordo salutis, and any framework which is based upon it, is deemed a straitjacket by liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino.³
Second, the CBCs are decidely corporate in emphasis, often calling for the kinds of broad structural changes in the social order of which Wesley was only dimly aware.

To be sure, these differences between the CBCs and Wesley’s societies are significant, but the crucial distinction between them actually lies in their different valuations of history and human activity as agents in the process of redemption. Thus, if the CBCs are seen in the context of Gutierrez’s second definition of liberation, as oppressed peoples taking control of their own historical destiny, then two important conclusions will follow. First, the CBCs become the locus of salvation, but only because they are reflective of, and closely associated with, the historical process which itself is deemed truly redemptive in much of liberation thought. As Dennis McCann wryly notes, the poor are not the objects of evangelism, but its subjects. It is they alone who are on the very fault lines of history which will usher in the next vigorous activity of God. To be close to them is to be close to God.

John Wesley, on the other hand, as leader of the Methodist societies, viewed God, not any historical process, as the efficient cause in salvation. In his sermon, “On Divine Providence,” for example, history is clearly an instrumental cause utilized by the Divine agent. But in the writings of such Latin American liberation theologians as Leonardo Boff, Hugo Assman and Jose Miranda, the line between efficient and instrumental causation is sometimes blurred, and the historical process takes on a much greater role than Wesley’s thought can allow. No doubt, this larger role for history in liberation theology is a function of its ongoing dialogue with Marxism—a dialogue to which John Wesley, quite obviously, was not privy.

Second, such language as “taking control over their own historical destiny” is perhaps too anthropocentric for Wesley, since it appears to place the emphasis on human activity and independence, rather than on Divine initiative and human dependence. Certainly, Wesley did not deny the importance of human efforts in the amelioration of poverty, disease and the like, but he simply insisted that such undertakings be viewed as the faithful response of the Church to the ever-active God. In this line of thought, it is God who acts by means of the instrumentalities of history and human achievement. In other words, it is God who initiates and empowers through grace, and it is humanity which responds and becomes one of the principal channels for the Divine activity in the world. Wesley expressed the point well in his sermon on “Working Out Our Own Salvation.” He wrote: “God works; therefore you can work ... God works, therefore you must work.”

III

It should be apparent by now that the definition of liberation employed by Gutierrez is multi-dimensional, and is attentive, not only to the social and political aspects of human life, but to a personal dimension as well. Indeed, his third aspect of liberation entails emancipation from sin and the acceptance of new life in Christ. But Gutierrez’s critics from the religious right have not always been appreciative of the inclusiveness of such a definition, since they have charged that...
liberation theology repudiates the notion of personal redemption in favor of a political one. Nevertheless, liberation theology does not deny the importance of the individual, but believes that the extensiveness of salvation simply cannot be limited to this area; the social and political life of humanity must be redeemed as well.

Though Gutierrez posits a threefold sense of liberation, he does not indicate clearly the structural relationship between the various dimensions. For example, what is the justification and motivation for Christian social and political activity? Does such concern arise from a personal sense of gratitude in response to the liberating activity of God, or does it come from a sensitive reading of the Divine activity in the world on behalf of the oppressed, and a desire to identify with such a movement? It is perhaps here that Wesley can be most helpful, for although his understanding of the extent of salvation was more limited than that of contemporary liberation theologians, Wesley indicated quite distinctly the raison d'etre for his reforming activity in the pithy phrase, “faith working by love.” In other words, those who are in a trusting relationship with God through Jesus Christ are liberated enough from their own self-curvature to be able to love their neighbors personally, and to move beyond this level to engage in social and political renewal. Wesley’s reforms in education, in easing the plight of the indigent, in attacking slavery and oppression, all grew out of his profound sense of gratitude to God, what Luther had referred to, in another context, as “quellende liebe.” Indeed, one of Wesley’s favorite texts in this area was 1 John 4:19, “We love, because he first loved us” (RSV).

But Wesley’s theology is helpful in another way concerning the area of emancipation from sin and acceptance of a new life in Christ. For although, as has already been pointed out, liberation theology incorporates a personal realm in its conception of liberation, one of its chief temptations is to focus on social and political constructs in its consideration of sin and evil, an endeavor which sometimes results in a vapid and confused doctrine of sin. For example, Elsa Tamez, a liberation theologian, maintains that, “Being born again, we acquire the ability to distinguish between life and death. We can identify those who produce death, the principalities and powers that govern the earth, the anti-Christ.” The danger here, of course, is that liberation theology, in its conversation with socialism, will be tempted to define sin along class lines, so that the dividing line between good and evil will be seen to run not through the center of the human heart, but through various classes, the oppressors and the oppressed, with the result that the oppressed will often fail to appreciate fully the extensiveness of their own evil.

John Wesley’s hamartiology, on the other hand, as expressed in his lengthy treatise on original sin published in 1757, underscored the universality of sin in language reminiscent of the continental reformers. To be sure, the Elizabethan Articles of Religion, to which Wesley ascribed, were informed by both the Augsburg and Wurtemberg Confessions with their incisive understandings of the nature and extent of sin. But, interestingly enough, Gutierrez’s principal work, A Theology of Liberation, contains no discussion of the doctrine of original sin at all.
Such an omission is clearly disturbing, and needs to be addressed, or else one can easily slip into the notion that there is, after all, a privileged position untainted by evil from which one can survey the sin of others and, in the words of Tamez, "identify the anti-Christ." The problem, then, is not that evil is identified in the public realm, as it should be, but rests in the failure to recognize also the evil within.

IV

Even within the narrow focus of this present essay, it is obvious that there is both similarity and divergence with respect to Wesleyan and liberation theology. Therefore, all broad-stroke assessments which see an easy accommodation between these two theologies are precluded in favor of more tightly nuanced and historically-attentive treatments. Clearly, Wesley was a vital reformer, but he could not discern that there are, at times, structural foundations to human evils that are impervious to sincere preaching and expressions of goodwill. His thought was pre-critical because he lived, moved and had his being in a pre-critical age. He can neither be faulted for this, nor can his differences from a critical theology be glossed over in an attempt to make his thought relevant. Nevertheless, some Methodist scholars have largely ignored Wesley's historical context and have transferred, without much ado, ideas from the eighteenth century into the twentieth. One such scholar writes:

If he [Wesley] did not—attain to the purview of what we call the social gospel or liberation theology, the founder of Methodism nevertheless espoused some of their crucial principles so that when these developments appeared they could be readily drawn into alliance with the Wesleyan tradition.

The reasoning cited above is especially problematic because it begs the question; it assumes what it should prove. No argumentation, either historical or theological, is offered to substantiate its sweeping claim. The mere observation of similar ideas, especially when they are extracted from their historical context, does not constitute compatibility or relevance. Saying it is so, does not make it so.

Now there might yet be a profound dialogue, even an alliance, between liberation and Wesleyan theology, but such claims must be substantiated by, and must await, more of the kinds of historical studies conducted by both Frank Baker and Leon Hynson. In addition, these studies should be supplemented by a thoroughgoing examination of the historical context which undergirds liberation theology. This latter task can be accomplished, in part, by an analysis of Latin American history and culture, especially in terms of Iberian influence, and more importantly, in terms of Roman Catholicism with its communitarian ideal, and its different conception and evaluation of vocation in commerce and industry from that of Protestantism.

To be as historically cognizant as possible is very much at the heart of what Outler has called Phase III of Wesley studies. This means that Wesley's theology, as well as liberation theology, must be understood on their own terms and in their own times before any sort of comparison can be made. To fail in this endeavor is to
allow Wesley’s theology to be taken captive to contemporary ideologies and interests, or to allow liberation theology to be forced unnecessarily into Wesleyan molds. But first let liberation theology be liberation theology, and then let Wesley be Wesley. Only then can fruitful dialogue begin.

Notes

Suggested Reading