AFTER-MODERN WESLEYAN SPIRITUALITY: TOWARD A NEO-WESLEYAN CRITIQUE OF CRITICISM

By Thomas C. Oden*

In choosing the odd phrase "after-modern Wesleyan spirituality," I intend by *spirituality* to point to the disciplined approach to life in the Spirit as formed under the guidance of John and Charles Wesley. By *after-modern*, I mean the course of actual history following the death of modernity. By *modernity* I mean the period, the ideology, and the malaise of the time from 1789 to 1989, from the Bastille to the Berlin Wall.

By *Wesleyan* I embrace all those who even today deliberately remain under the intentioanl discipline of Wesley's connection of spiritual formation, freely subject to his teaching, admonition, and guidance. Does this eliminate the millions of Methodist laity and clergy who suffer almost total amnesia concerning Wesley except for a romanticized, triumphalist version of Aldersgate? Not altogether, since even they continue to sing the hymns of the Wesleyan revival, share in its liturgy, and reappropriate certain lively fragments of Wesleyan spiritual formation.

In postmodern Wesleyan consciousness we take for granted all available methods of modern inquiry. The postmodern return to classical Christianity is not a simplistic, nostalgic return to premodern methods as if modernity never happened. Rather it is a rigorous, painstaking rebuilding from the ashes of modernity using treasures old and new for moral and spiritual reconstruction.

What makes this Wesleyan consciousness "*post*" is the fact that it is no longer intimidated by the absolute relativism of mod rot. Post modern Wesleyan spirituality has doubly paid its dues to modernity, and now is searching for forgotten wisdoms long ruled out by the narrowly fixated dogmas of modernity.

There is in postmodern Wesleyan consciousness a growing critique of criticism, a pervasive discontent with underlying aspects of failed enlightenment methods, especially with their moral wreckage and cultural impoverishment. Included in this critique of criticism is a growing recognition that many survivable ideas once assumed to be modern are actually premodern in origin, or grounded in ancient wisdoms.

**Dr. Oden, Henry Anson Butte Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University, presented this as the keynote attress of the Wesleyan Theological Society annual meeting held at ATS in November, 1992. Although somewhat edited, it still maintains its original oral character.*

The eighteenth century evangelical revivals were in a superficial sense quintessentially modern as a critique of Protestant scholasticism, yet coming in a deeper sense in the unique form of a reappropriation of classic Christian wisdom, the plain "old religion . . . true primitive Christianity" ["A Letter to a Roman Catholic," 15 in A. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 498].

Wherever modern criticism's premodern antecedents have been even faintly recognized or covertly utilized in the mod-fixated university, an attempt has been made systematically to avoid or ignore their premodern roots, in accord with the ideology and settled habits of modern chauvinism. The dynamics of repression and intentional behavior modification in Wesley's pastoral care have never been considered a legitimate subject for Psych. 101. Nor have the contributions to the theory and practice of the intensive group experience in Wesleyan societies ever been appraised as a fit topic in Soc. 101. Part of the critique of modern criticism is simply pointing out the historic roots of methods falsely presumed to have been invented since Rousseau, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Some erroneously think of criticism as if it were stricty a modern phenomenon, with no premodern antecedents. This is the premise being challenged by the postmodern phenomenon, with no premodern antecedents. This is the premise being challenged by the postmodern neoclassical critique of criticism, which is not without its Wesleyan advocates, among whom are (to cite an incomplete list): Hauerwas, Deschner, Borgen, Willimon, Wainwright, Maddox, Gunter, Snyder, Campbell, Thorsen, Dayton, Wood, Wynkoop, Runyan, Shelton, Meeks, Bassett, Collins, Kenlaw, Rowe, Abraham, McCormick, and the students of Outler among them. This mélange has varied characters of different sorts and warts, but what they have in common is that all have survived the death of modernity ever more deeply committed to the renewal of time-tested Wesleyan spiritual discipline.

The turning point we celebrate today is: Wesleyan piety has in fact outlived the dissolution of modernity. Even if the general condition of popular congregational health is uncertain, there is an emerging resolve in the scattered worldwide Wesleyan family to renew the familiar, classic evangelical spiritual disciplines: scripture reading, prayer, mutual care of souls, intensive primary group accountability, and seeking to walk in the way of holiness, regardless of how the environing world interprets it. Having been disillusioned by the illusions of modernity, Wesleyans are now engaged in a low-keyed, quiet determination unpretentiously to return to the spiritual disciplines that have shaped our distinctive connection.

This emergent consciousness remains small in scale and modest in influence, and is still being chiefly advocated "by young, unknown, inconsiderable men" [Sermon #4, "Scriptural Christianity," iv. 11 in A. C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 179] and women, as it was in Wesley's day. It should not be exaggerated as if it were already a world-historical spectacle. But it nonetheless is an event: the reappearance of earnest Wesleyan spirituality amid the post-modern world.

What follows is another round of inquiry into post-modern classical Christian consciousness, a theme I have previously approached in *After Modernity . . . What?: Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) and *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America & Russia* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), yet applied now to the gradual reemergence of Wesleyan spirituality as a viable mode of recovery of classic consensual Christianity.

With a different audience it would be possible and perhaps edifying to speak of the post-modern recovery of classical Christianity through the restoration of Anglican spirituality, or the eastern orthodox tradition, or post-Soviet Russian Christianity. But in this Wesleyan context, it is fitting to focus primarily on the Wesleyan form of the postmodern rediscovery of classic Christianity. The Reformed and Lutheran traditions have already had their day of renewal in the five decades of Reformed neo-orthodoxy of the period from 1920-70, but those days were never celebrated heartily by marginalized Wesleyans or the heirs of the holiness and sanctificationist traditions.

The Limits and Pretenses of Modern Criticism

Postmodern spirituality is now unwilling to be uncritically spoonfed by faltering modern methods. Part of the delightful and intriguing game of postmodern neoclassic consciousness focuses upon puncturing the myth of modern superiority, the pretense of modern chauvinism that assumes the intrinsic inferiority of all premodern wisdoms.

What follows are in summary form four potential harbingers of an emerging postmodern Wesleyan critique of modern criticism:

CASE 1: A postmodern Wesleyan critique of *sociology of knowledge* is free to ask how knowledge elites doing the hypermodern criticism harbor persistent and often silent private and elitist interests that shape the outcomes of their supposedly impartial critique. Postmodern Wesleyan spirituality does not blush or hesitate in boldly using sociology of knowledge as a tool to investigate and disarm

ideologically motivated advocates of particularly skewed social constructions of reality, even as Wesley himself was a critic of self-deception with regard to egoistic interests.

CASE 2: A postmodern, neoclassical Wesleyan critique of *psychoanalytic* criticism stands poised to ask how pathetically ineffective psychoanalytic therapy is over against spontaneous remission rates, thereby applying an empiricist-behaviorist grid to the assessment of psychotherapies, with their cure rates not exceeding the spontaneous remission rate, even as Wesley himself asked rigorously about the behavioral consequences of speculative theories and tendentious opinions.

CASE 3: The postmodern Wesleyan critique of *hermeneutical criticism* stands poised to speak of the plain sense of scripture, resisting speculative fashions of form critisicm that tyrannize and rape the test. Wesley himself was a keen observer and critic of speculative historical approaches that violate the text. The Wesleyan hermeneutic trusts the apostolic primitive rememberers more than contemporary ideologically motivated, advocacy revisionist remeberers. It does not shy away from-pointing out ways in which modern hermeneutical analysis remains unconsciously and covertly parasitic upon the heritage of rabbinic Midrash and classic Christian exegesis of holy writ.

CASE 4: A postmodern, neoclassical Wesleyan critique of *literary-critical, form-critical and historical-critical inquiry* stands poised to ask how the economic interests, social location, and covert value assumptions of the hypermodern critics impinge upon their pretended objective historical analysis. It leverages the sociology of knowledge as a basis of the critique of deconstructionist criticism. The role of historical science must now be reassessed precisely amid the collapse of historical science. Postmodern, neoclassic historical research is as interested in the plain textual content analyses of Josephus, Lactantius, Eusebius, Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, Augustine, and Theodoret of Cyrus as in modern ideologically shaped (Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, or deconstructionist) mutations of revisionist historical criticism.

Postmodern Wesleyan consciousness does not hesitate to enter the methodolgical fray, play devil's advocate, and stand ready when necessary to announce that "the emperor [in this case the uncritical university with its knowledge elite] has no clothes." Modern academia, which imagined itself handsomely furnished with elaborate intellec-

tual attire, elegant theories, and intricate methods of research, is within the postmodern environment feeling ever more exposed, altogether unclad and unmasked.

In all these ways the fashionable modes of criticism are being found vulnerable to a candid postmodern critique of modern forms of criticism. This opens the way for a deepened inquiry into the truth claims of classic Jewish and Christian texts, including those of the Wesleyan tradition of spiritual formation. The postmodern ethos introduces us to a postcritical situation, assuming proficiency in modern critical methods in the determination to rectify their limitations and hubris.

Detractors may caricature the postmodern recovery of Wesleyan consciousness as if it were precritical. I say postcritical. In my own case, it is far too late to be precritical is one has already spent most of one's life chasing rabbits of a supposed criticism base on the premises of modern chauvinism (that newer is always better, older worse). That can no longer be precritical which follows after assimilating two centuries of modern naturalistic and idealistic criticism. If it is thought precritical merely to take seriously sources of wisdom that emerged before a modern period which is deceptively dubbed "the age of criticism," then in that sense Jews, Muslims, and Christians join in the delight in being precritical — but note how self-incriminating that premise is to the integrity of modern criticism, if it supposes that one is able only to use sources of one's own historical period.

Fluff Posties and Tough Posties: Whether Postmodern Means *Ultra*modern

Meanwhile, astute observers are advised to strike *post* and insert *ultra*when the word postmodernity is used routinely by vant-garde academics. For them, "postmodern" consistently means simply hypermodern, where the value assumptions of modernity are nostalgically recollected, and premodernity compulsively disregarded; meanwhile the emergent actual postmodernity that is being suffered through outside the ivory tower is not yet grasped or imagined by those in it.

Let us mark a firm line between fluff and tough posties. For *fluff posties* of the hothouse academic guild, postmodernity is merely an arguable hermeneutical theory to be debated, constructed, and deconstructed in universities, many of them spawned by Wesley's prolific American progeny. Fluff postmodernism in fact is ensconced in certain literary and religion departments of Wesleyan-born but now recreant universities like Duke, Wesleyan, Syracuse, and Northwestern.

For *tough posties* of the emergent suffering post-modern world, postmodernity is an actual historical experience to be met, lived through, negotiated, and survived amid presently unfolding history. Among fluff guildies, when one says "postmodern," one thinks ultramodern. Among tough posties, when you say "postmodern," you mean plainly the real world that has survived the ugly death of modern ideologies. Postmodernity in this hard sense is a struggle to rebuild civilization and moral fiber and the way of holiness amid the slow, painful dissolution of modernity, whether in America or Russia, where the center is not holding.

For fluff posties, postmodern is a linguistic oxymoron. For hard, realistic postmoderns, postmodernity is a palpable historical reality. An oxymoron is a sharp-dull saying which, by looking smart, says something dimwitted. Guildies are prone to the oxymoronic usage of the term "postmodernity."

These two meanings are competing in earnest in a small corner of the actual world (academia, especially in those forms of university life spawned by the nineteenth century Wesleyan ethos) for the single term "postmodern" — whether it will be nuanced in a fluff or tough way.

A growing number of Wesleyan intellectuals are prone to this tougher, harder, more ascetic usage, although the jury is still out. The actual world we must live in following the devastations of enlightenment morality is a real world of AIDS, dope, gangs, and a Madonna masturbating on video, not merely a debatable theory of interpretation grounded in the ideas of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Rather it is the actual world that has survived the death of the havoc left by Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche.

The Squabble Among Hagiographers Over the Definition of Postmodernity

Guild posties are less interested in the actual struggle of human sufferers following the collapse of modernity than in securing a posh tenure slot where they are free to spin out endless deconstructions. The terrible apocalypse envisioned by orthodox postmodern Christians is already becoming an actual history. Hard postmodernity must now live with the battered world created by the saints of the soft posties. The exponents of hard postmodern analysis are Neo-Athanasians whose task is modern halo inspection, contemporary counter-hagiography, and the hermeneutic of suspicion.

It should be evident that I do not mean by "postmodernity" what Derrida and Foucault mean. The unhappy campers that apply the

hermeneutic of suspicion to each premise or assumptions are not postmodern but ultramodern. In another sense they are reactionary, in that they are reverting once again to the radical skepticism of the enlightenment. Deconstructionism has about it the smell of death. I ask you: How many decades will the name of Derrida be remembered? Optimists might predict two or three. But after those decades, how long will Athanasius and Augusting and Luther and Wesley stand in human memory? Fluff posties are putting all their chips on a spent horse. Wesleyans have lived through fits of skepticism before.

Literary critics like Harold Bloom, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish have lead us into a cult of subjective self-assertion and narcissistic sentiment that reduces truth to private preference and celebrates a new hagiography. There are three leading canonized saints of the passing order: St. Sigmund, St. Frederich, and St. Karl. Rorty and Fish are hardly saints, but do pretend to be practical appliers of the gnosis of the saints. Wesleyans know that Fish's aroma of mod rot will not last long, but meanwhile human beings are suffering with the consequences of an actual postmodern world sired by ultramodernity. And Fish still swims and spawns in the streams of Duke under the spire of its lofty chapel.

In a decisive twist of irony, the very university establishments once engendered by classic Christiantiy, including many Wesleyan-founded universities, now offer gilded chairs to tenured radicals who debunk Christian saints and promote the ultramodern canon, with a PC though police as enforcers. A central task of their ultramodernist hagiography is that of demeaning, denigrating, and impugning all previous saints of all prior social constructions of reality. Hence it is far more than a minor linguistic squabble that rages over the definition of postmodernity. It is an Athanasian task that on some campuses must be pursued *contra mundo*.

Ordinary working people do not suffer much from the prolix bussings of soft postie theories of interpretation, but they do suffer daily and silently over the actual conditions of postmodern history that have followed the modern era. It is this history to which postmodern Wesleyans must point fearlessly without being intimidated by the absolute relativists. We are living through an actual period of postmodern grief and reconstruction. For in the real postmodern world, we live with the devastating consequences that have followed the ideologies of those whom the ultramodern guildies view as saints. While the languishing ideologies of Saints Karl, Freidrich and Sigmund are moribund, the children of the world they spawned struggle to survive in single parent hovels with latchkey kids shaped morally by M-TV.

Some pop theology promoters and mod boosters are annoyed with me that I have remained stubbornly determined to use the term

postmodern with my own distinctive, idiosyncratic spin, with a meaning far different from recent majority of pop deconstructionism who sit in the catbird seat in some university departments. I confess openly that I was writing about postmodernity precisely these terms in 1968 [in *The Structure of Awareness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969)], long before the recent deluge of deconstructionism. So I wonder why I must now revise my idiosyncratic useage merely to fit the convenience of others who have been more fashionably corrupting the term "postmodern" as a euphemism for ultramodernity.

Reframing the Question of Wesley and Modernity

We are about to enter into a conference dialogue focused upon the relation of Wesley and modernity. There are many legitimate ways of framing the question, not just the peculiar way I am proposing. My question is not how Wesley influenced modernity, which itself would be an intriguing inquiry. Nor is it focused on sociological or historical descriptions of modern Wesleyan institutions which have shaped or been bent out of shape by decaying modern ideologies. These are now no longer contemporary issues, but at this late date have the status of historical queries since we already have on our hands a tough, postmodern environment.

Another paper, not this one, could easily argue that Wesley himself was a prime co-conspirator in the rise of modernity, although not without serious qualification. Within the limits of this essay, I find it more pertinent to stress the decisive differences between Wesley and the enlightenment ideology that has pervaded the late modernity, and the challenge to and opportunity of Wesleyan spirituality to address and reshape the post-modern situation on the basis of the plain sense of scripture, personal evangelical testimony, sacramental sobriety, one-by-one conversion, weekly face-to-face interpersonal accountability, and sanctifying grace.

My focus is upon whether the recent Wesleyan ethos, having colluded ruinously with declining modernity, now has a special calling and mission to bring by grace a measure of sanctity and happiness into the small healing communities of the post modern ethos, and whether there is a special need for classical Wesleyan pastoral care and preaching amid the emergent postmodern crisis. This is the frame of reference that I prefer to pursue, though the other historical and descriptive questions would be worthy of serious investigation.

Defining Modernity

1. The duration of the *epoch* of modernity is now clearly identifiable as a precise two hundred year period between 1789 and 1989, between the French Revolution and the collapse of Communism. The dating of historical periods is always disputable, but this one cries out with clarity, since it was announced with such a dramatic beginning point (the storming of the Bastille), and closed with such a precise moment of collapse (the literal fall of a symbolic concrete wall in Berlin).

2. Within the bounds of these two centuries, an *ideological worldview* has arisen and fallen, come and gone. This worldview is filled with the humanistic ethics and scientific values and idealistic hopes of the enlightenment period which have until recently dominated modern times. This worldview has promoted — within the modern university, media, and church — the assumptions, values, and ideology of the French enlightenment, coupled with German idealism and British empiricism. These ideas have invaded and to some degree temporarily conquered university communities, including those founded by Wesleyan and sanctificationist educators (among them are Northwestern, Syracuse, University of Southern California, Boston University, American University, Dickinson, Oberlin, Wesleyan, Duke, S.M.U., Emory, and Drew).

3. The bullseye difinition of modernity is as a disabling social *malaise*, a crash of the moral immune system. This is a sad fact of history in the last thirty years. This ideological worldview has been spiraling in relentless disarray during the last three decades, the acute phase of rapidly deteriorating modernity.

Postmodern consciousness is formally defined simply as that form of consciousness that necessarily must follow the era of spent modernity (the *period* from 1789 to 1989 which characteristically embraced an enlightenment *worldview* now in grave *malaise*). If one takes the premise that the modernity we have described is lurching toward death, and that history will continue, whatever it is that will continue will be postmodernity. If X is ending, then post-X is emerging. If what is ending is rightly named modernity, then what is to follow its death we call postmodernity. This is less an ideological program than a simple succession. "Post" is the Latin prefix meaning "after, following upon, later than." So "postmodernity" in my meaning is nothing more or less complicated that *what follows modernity*.

Four Motifs of Decadent Modernity: Individualism, Hedonism, Natural and Modern Chauvinism

Modernity is epitomized by the reductive naturalism of Freud which is no longer viable as a therapy, the historical utopianism of Marx which is now in collapse from Vilnius to Managua, the narcissistic assertiveness of Nietzsche which is now killing itself on Los Angeles streets, and the modern chauvinism typified by Strauss, Troeltsch, and Bultmann which exalts the ethos of late modernity itself to an undisputed norm that presumes to judge all premodern texts and ideas.

These four motifs flow together into an ethos that still sentimentally shapes the knowledge elites of the liberal Wesleyan ethos, especially its politicized bureaucracies and Wesley-nurtured universities, who remain largely unprepared to grasp their own vulnerability and possibility within this decisive historical situation. Those Wesleyan-founded and once-funded universities who have most lusted to adapt comfortably to modernity remain behind the curve, following the wave, and not up to speed with the actual reversals of contemporary history. The liberal Wesleyan knowledge elites (including media, academics, bishops and bureaucrats) are tardy in grasping the moral sensibilities that have long since been grasped by those being more intentionally reformed by Wesleyan sanctificationist disciplines.

Four key motifs of late stage modernity are in a process of disintegration, each now hammering out the final syllables of its own epitaph:

- *Autonomous individualism* focuses on the detached individual as a self-sufficient, sovereign self. Western societies are now having to learn to live with the consequences of the social destruction to which excessive individualism has led the me-first-now generation. The curtain is closing with the whimpering sighs of the me generation, whose progeny are being forced to become the us generation.

- *Narcissistic hedonism* is in crisis today. It is best symbolized by the recent history of sexuality. The party is over for the sexual revolution. The party-crasher and terminator is AIDS. We are now having to learn to live with the consequences of the sexual, interpersonal, and familial devastation to which money-grubbing, lust-enslaved, porn-infested abortive self-indulgence has led us. It is visible in living color whenever one turns on the network tube for what is called entertainment, which turns out to be fixated on sex and violence. Its interpersonal fruits are loneliness, divorce, and the despairing substitution of sexual experimentation for intimacy. That one's narcissistic binge becomes another's lifelong misery is evident from the 375,000

American babies born last year suffering from their mothers' drug addictions.

• *Reductive naturalism* is that view that seeks to reduce all forms of knowing to laboratory experimentation, empirical observation and quantitative analysis. It is the reduction of sex to orgasm, persons to bodies, psychology to stimuli, economics to planning mechanisms, and politics to machinery. This ideology is today in crisis.

• *Absolute moral relativism* views all moral values as arbitrarily contingent upon the changing social determinants of human cultures. It is dogmatically absolute in its moral relativism because it asserts relativism uncritically and unconditionally. The postmodern world is the world that has been forced to live with the disastrous social results of absolute moral relativism — the forgetfulness of final judgment beyond history, the reduction of all moral claims to a common denominator of mediocrity. The communities in Wesley's connection have suffered deeply from the pretense that all value judgments are equally legitimate and all ideas are born equal and are equally tolerable, since presumed to be exhaustively formed by social determinants, without any transcendent or eschatological or even moral reference. We are now having to learn to live with and beyond the anomie into which this modern dogmatism has plunged us.

What is Left?

We are now entering into a historical phase in which modernity is dying, and whatever is to follow modernity is already taking embryonic form. Few can any longer pretend that these deteriorating forces have vitality except among certain protected elites, in come universities, some church circles, and in defensive bureaucracies.

The Marxist-Leninism of the Soviet period, The Freudian sexual liberation of pop American culture, the Nietzscheanism of European nihilism, and the modern chauvinism of once-confident Bultmannians are all now deteriorating social processes, each unmasked as having a limited vision of human history and possibility. All are under siege. They are fallng like dominoes. Each has colluded to support the other. These are the key late-modern conceptualities having enormous difficulties dragging themselves into the postmodern world. All four are quintessentially modern, not postmodern.

The transition into the world after modernity may last many decades. Now we see only a deepening crisis. But out of it by grace is coming

a society less deeply enamored by the illusions of modernity. For those who have eyes to see, we are already through the funeral of the four key assumptions of modernity, although it may take time to realize just how unresponsive are the corpses. The funeral occurred in the summer of 1989.

Postmodernity

If these whimpers echo the dying modern agony, what is meant by postmodernity? History does not stand still. It is always confronting the Wesleyan connection with new constraints, options, and requirements. The challenge today is not the same as in 1738 or 1784 or 1844 or 1968.

The transition s from modernity to postmodernity may take many decades, but it has decisively begun already. Although Wesleyans tarry at the frazzled end of modernity, there is no cause for despair, apocalyptic anxiety, or immobilized frustration. We are being invited to remain open precisely to these new historical conditions, and see these very retrogressions as offering the promise of a vital new expression of providential possibility. Biblically viewed, this dissolution is a providential judgment of sin and an opportunity for convicting grace.

Those well-instructed in Wesley's connections of spiritual formation are prepared to understand that amid any cultural death, gracious gifts of providential guidance are being offered to humanity, and unsullied forms of the providential hedging of God in history are emerging so as to curb human folly and sin. Wesleyans can continue to appreciate many technological and some social and economic achievements of modernity, even while they soberly recognize their ideological underpinnings now face radical crisis.

Whether the Neoclassical Interpretation of Postmodernity Finally Amounts to Antimodernity

Postmodern consciousness is not rightly understood merely as a reactionary rejection of all things modern, or a simple negative emotive reaction against contemporaneity. Mark well: There is no reason to be opposed to something that is dead. Anti-modernity makes the egregious error of overestimating the continuing resilience of modern consciousness.

If modernity still had intellectual and moral vitality, it might more plausibly be argued that the hard postmodern reaction is merely a

frustrated attack upon modernity. The leading observation of postmodern consciousness is not that modernity is bad, but that it is dead. This is why postmodern Wesleyan spirituality is not rightly defined as anti-modern.

My feeling is less anger than poignancy and pathos toward the death of modernity. The period of mourning is soon to be over. It lasted long enough, and we now have to be about living, surviving, and rebuilding.

The Promise of the Postmodern Future: Where Are We Heading?

Those made alive by Wesley's connection of spiritual formation are now living and breathing in a fecund, volatile, decisive, potentially pivotal period of evangelical opportunity. New possibilities and aptitudes for spiritual formation which have had a history of being repeatedly disdained by modernity are at long last viable. We need not be driven to despair by the pressures these postmodern possibilities thrust upon us.

Since no one can see into the future, it would be folly to pretend to make a program out of futurity. Those who depict the present situation descriptively and then pretend to extrapolate these trends normatively and indefinitely do not understand, as did Wesley, the incalculable reversibility of human freedom. Futurists who imagine that postmodernity is on a fixed or predictable trajectory have failed to grasp the simplest point about the indeterminacy of human freedom.

Assuming this unpredictability, it is still possible to ponder the likely direction of postmodern spirituality in the decades ahead. It is more apt to involve a search for incremental shifts toward proximate justice than some supposed totally revolutionary redefinition of human order. It will more likely seek organic changes grounded in particular, rooted social traditions than massive social engineering or planning on the pretense that no adequate neighborhoods or families or communities of prayer ever previously existed. It is more likely to invest confidence in smaller, intimate, interpersonally accountable units than to look compulsively toward central planning or bureaucratic solutions to local and domestic problems. Inheritors of Wesleyan spirituality will more likely be calling small scale communities to take responsibility for their own futures than turning their futures over to designer-elites who tend always to plan their own interest first into any projected social design.

Above all, aftermodern Wesleyan spirituality will be searching for the recovery of the family, for enduring marriages and good environments for the growth and nurture of children. Postmodernity,

whether east or west, will be searching for a way back to the eternal verities that grounded societies before the devastations of late modernity. The direction of postmodernity, in short, promises to be an organic approach to incremental change grounded in traditionally tested values formed less by abstract rational schemes than by concrete historical experience. Postmodern consciousness will nurture the incremental increase of slow-growing human organisms and friendships and sexual fidelity while resisting the illusory rhetoric of social mapmaking, human engineering, or massive schemes of economic redistribution with which humanity has had such miserable historical experience over the last two centuries.

That is what I think will at some point begin to happen in the postmodern world. But it will happen more out of necessity and revulsion than as a result of some vast, new, rationalistic blueprint on some bureaucratic social planner's desk. The only thing reasonably certain about our future is that it will outlive all our shrewdest predictions.

What remains good and lasting and redeemable about the residues of modernity? Each attempt to answer points to some ambiguous, vulnerable, corruptible, finite good, and only indirectly to the consummate and unconditional good: democratic capitalism, technological achievement, rapid transport, computer technology, flushing toilets, neon cities that buzz and dance with frenetic market exchange, medical breakthroughs, fax machines, broadcast media, credit cards, biogenetics, the blues, the steel guitar, and virtual reality. This is all modernity, and who would be so foolish as to suppose that it is either unambiguously evil or obsolete? But whether it can save from sin, or render life meaningful, or heal guilt or relieve anxiety or liberate from idolatry — here we must not claim too much. With each modern technological achievement comes compounded temptations to treat that limited good as if absolute, and to use good means for evil ends.

Wesleyan Spirituality After Modernity

As far as east is from west, modernity is morose wherever we turn, infusing in our nostrils the invasive aroma of mod rot. Meanwhile postmodern consciousness is emerging across all economic and cultural barriers. Classic Wesleyan spirituality is rediscovering its identity amid this postmodern passage.

There is no single definitive expression of postmodern Wesleyan spirituality. I am seeking to describe a rainbow of renewing forms of small-group spirituality rooted in Wesleyan memory. It is not a narrow, monolithic, fixed entity, but a multi-colored splash of sanctifica-

tionist experimentalism.

How many fashions and styles of modernity have appeared and died since the birth of Wesley? The death of once-modern Aristotelian scholasticism was already a fact by his time. The via moderna of nominalism died with the emergence of Descartes. The via moderna of Cartesian rationalism died with the emergence of the empiricist tradition. Later the via moderna of Newtonian physics died with the emergence of Einstein's physics and relativity theory and the advent of quantum mechanics. The premises of Victorian sexuality died with the emergence of psychoanalysis.

The point: In the three centuries of Wesleyan spirituality this connection has accumulated considerable experience with various deaths of assorted forms of once-modern consciousness. Only the historically uninformed imagine this recent modernity to be the first or unprecedented or absolutely decisive one.

Our once-proud enlightenment secular humanistic modernity too is dying of its own self-chosen diseases: STDs, teen suicide, the urban murder rate, addictions, abortions, and anomie. Meanwhile a new civilization is being born. Wesleyan-formed pilgrims who remember that sin pervades all human striving will not expect postmodernity to be without pride, sensuality, and perennial temptations to corruption. But we do have a right to expect that we can learn something from the social disasters of recent decades.

The Wesleyan approach to human renewal invites the dispossessed, nomadic families of modern times not to be afraid to enter the postmodern world, anymore than Wesley feared entering the contentious villages of Hannoverian England and Ireland. Those who enslave themselves to passing idolatries should not be surprised when the gods are found to have clay feet. When these beloved arrangements and systems die, we understandably grieve and feel angry and frustrated. Meanwhile the grace-enabled can celebrate the imperceptible providences of history whereby each dying historical formation is giving birth to new forms and refreshing occasions for responsible human life.

The Judge who meets us in the final Great Assize is quietly present already in the death of cultures as the destroyer and judge of social as well as personal sin. Through death, God makes way for ever new personal and cultural formations. Cultures come and go, but God lives from everlasting to everlasting. Human beings see the river of time from a particular vantage point on the bank, but God, as if from above in eternal simultaneity, sees the entire river in its whole extent, at every point synchronously. Those spiritually formed by Wesley do not waste time resenting the inexorable fact that each culture, like each person, dies. Whatever the limits of finitude, each resonsible individual is called

to care deeply about the needy neighbor amid the emergence of whatever uncertain social futures.

Sanctifying grace offers beleaguered cultural pilgrims the power and means of trusting fundamentally in the One who proffers us this ever-changing, forever-dying historical process. Even when our most precious idolatries are threatened, the ground an giver of history is friendly and eternally forgiving, and ever-renewing.

The Postmodern Wesleyan Rediscovery of Classic Christianity

What is happening today is a profound rediscovery of the texts and wisdom of the long-neglected patristic tradition. For Wesleyans this means especially the eastern church fathers of the earliest Christian centuries, in whom Wesley expressed such avid interest.

What is happening amid this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian scripture and the consensual exegetical guides of the formative period of its canonization and interpretation. Postmodern Wesleyans are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of modernity, and having become disillusioned with the illusions of modernity, are again studying the word of God made known in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial texts for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating community.

The distinction between modern and postmodern is too flatly perceived if viewed merely as the general truism that one civilization is dying and another being born. Few would quarrel with that bland way of putting it, but it hardly advances the argument. Harder disagreements come in trying to describe precisely what is passing and what is coming to be, and how the body of Christ, particularly in its Wesleyan ethos, relates to both.

What we khow is that a world is dying, perhaps not wholly dead yet, but dead in emergent vitality, and only awaiting a lingering dying process of that world dominated by the failed ideologies of autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, and absolute moral relativism. Others may call that world something other than later-stage modernity, but I have no better way of naming it.

In describing the trek from liberal Methodist modernity to a postmodern classic reappropriation of the patristic exegesis and Wesleyan evangelicalism, I am in part describing my own autobiographical journey. After spending more than half of my adult life as an avid advocate and defender of modernity (from Marx through

Nietzsche through Freud to Bultmann, with stops along the way with Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, Alexander Lowen, Martin Heidegger, and Eric Berne), what has changed for me is the steady slow growth toward consensual ancient classic Christianity with its proximate continuity, catholicity, and apostolicity. This has elicited for me a growing resistance to faddism, novelty, heresy, anarchism, antinomianism, pretensions of discontinuity, revolutionary bravado, and nonhistorical idealism. Wesley's significance is not that he is an inventor of a better Christianity, but an incomparable mentor of the old Christianity.