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Methodism and the Mass

R. T. BECKWITH

MODERN Methodist historians have devoted a great deal of attention to the ministry and the eucharist in the thought and practice of the Wesleys. On the former topic we have had A. B. Lawson, *John Wesley and the Christian Ministry: the Sources and Development of his Opinions and Practice* (London, S.P.C.K., 1963), and G. F. Moede, *The Office of Bishop in Methodism: its History and Development* (Zürich, Publishing House of the Methodist Church, 1964). On the latter topic we have had J. E. Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (London, Epworth Press, 1948), J. C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London, Dacre Press, 1951), and J. R. Parris, *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments* (London, Epworth Press, 1963). Interest in these subjects shows no signs of abating, for in the last two years two further works have been devoted to them: Franz Hildebrandt, *I Offered Christ: a Protestant Study of the Mass*, and Frederick Hunter, *John Wesley and the Coming Comprehensive Church* (London, Epworth Press, 1967 and 1968 respectively, 63s. and 15s.). The connection between these subjects is close, especially as Wesley strictly confined the administration of the sacraments (unlike preaching) to the ordained ministry or 'priesthood', and was therefore prepared, in cases of necessity, to ordain priests himself. Moreover, both subjects have great ecumenical importance, though in different ways. As regards the ministry, Wesley's ordinations and use of lay-preachers led to the isolation of Methodism from the historic episcopal succession, and the question now arises whether the Methodist churches can conscientiously agree to be integrated into this succession once more. As regards the eucharist, the Wesleys used language not unlike that used by Anglo-Catholics and even Roman Catholics, and the question therefore arises whether there is not hope here of agreement between Methodists and Anglicans, or between Methodists and Roman Catholics, on this second great topic of controversy.

If the thought and practice of the Wesleys are to be any sort of norm for Methodists, they must of course be first understood. The Wesleys were eighteenth century Anglican clergy, bred in the way and versed in the literature of seventeenth and eighteenth century Anglicanism. Their thought and practice has to be understood against this background. Unfortunately, the Methodist literature listed above reflects in many cases a very superficial knowledge of the Anglican divinity of that period. The use of somewhat similar language is assumed to imply the same doctrine, and Anglo-Catholic teaching on episcopacy, the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice is uncritically read back into Non-juring and Caroline literature, thus merging three distinct points of view into one. Frederick Hunter's new book, which is better informed than most, and is illuminating

(even if somewhat speculative) on many points, gives a full exhibition of this confusion—with regard to episcopacy on pp. 18f., 110, and with regard to the holy communion on pp. 34, 64-67—besides committing other less significant errors of fact on pp. 15, 31, 89, 98 and 109. This confusion allows the author to conclude that, since the Wesleys were in such large agreement with Anglo-Catholicism, nothing need hinder their modern successors from uniting with the Church of England on Anglo-Catholic terms. Dr. Hildebrandt's important new treatise is unfortunately not exempt from the same confusion, but since the author is in this case a Methodist dissentient, he carries back his rejection of Anglo-Catholicism and the union-scheme into the eighteenth century, and by the same token rejects the eucharistic teaching of the Wesleys and their Anglican mentors. Cosin, Hayward, Thorndike, Jeremy Taylor, and with them the Fathers, all come in for some rather gratuitous criticism. Dr. Hildebrandt is too learned a scholar not to know that there are distinctions to be drawn here, but he evidently regards them as unimportant. Some explanation of this is provided by the fact that he is a Lutheran in exile, and has brought with him into Methodism Luther's belief in the real presence. A man who believes in the real presence cannot easily use the sacrificial language of the Fathers and the Wesleys without feeling that he is getting dangerously close to the mass, though one or two of the older Lutheran dogmatists achieved the feat. On the other hand, some modern Lutheran theologians who recognise that there is such a tendency (Regin Prenter, for example) have ceased to regard it as a danger, and can even claim that Lutheranism and Anglo-Catholicism have a similar doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice! This is a mistake of which Dr. Hildebrandt would never be guilty.

Dr. Hildebrandt modestly describes his book as 'really no more than a first collection of material for a proper study', and it mainly consists of quotations. As a collection of material, however, it is very large and well classified, so that no reader could fail to benefit from the author's learning. In gathering his excerpts he ranges far outside Methodism and Anglicanism. He naturally draws much from Lutheran sources, but he is by no means ignorant of Roman Catholic literature, and in the historical field he draws a most interesting parallel between the attempts made to find a *via media* in the Reformation period and the attempts being made in the Ecumenical Movement today. His judgment on present-day Anglicanism is challenging. He sees it as tending (among Evangelicals as well) towards an unprincipled comprehensiveness (p. 56f.).

The confusion between the eucharistic thinking of the Carolines, the non-Jurors, the Wesleys and the Anglo-Catholics has a history worth tracing to its sources. The confusion undoubtedly originated with the Anglo-Catholic controversialists of the last century, who attempted to show by *catenae* of quotations (often wrenched from their contexts) that they and they alone were the true Anglicans. Such *catenae*, drawn from earlier Anglican writers, are a prominent feature of the *Tracts for the Times*. One of the earliest writers to make use of the Wesley's *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* was Archdeacon G. A. Denison in his book *Saravia on the Eucharist*, published in 1855, but a succession

of writers followed in his footsteps at a somewhat later period. The burden of their contention was that the Wesleys held Anglo-Catholic views, from which later Methodism had degenerated sadly, and to which it should return. Modern Methodist writers have been more than half-inclined to accept these contentions, and to adopt the Anglo-Catholic views supposedly held by the Wesleys. In doing so, however, they have made notably little impression on modern Anglo-Catholics, as is indicated by the writings of the latter against the union-scheme. The attitude taken in works like the Bishop of Willesden's *To Every Man's Conscience* (published by the author, 2s. 6d.), E. W. Trueman Dicken's *Not This Way* (London, League of Anglican Loyalists, 2s. 6d.) and F. H. Mountney's *No Priest, No Church* (London, Faith Press, 10s. 6d.) is the traditional Tractarian attitude that Anglicanism is Anglo-Catholicism and that Methodism (whatever may have been the case with the Wesleys) is quite a different thing. The Bishop of Willesden, just like Pusey before him, is even prepared to quote Ridley in support of the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice! The only really appealing things about this historically blinkered literature are its insistence on the supremacy of theology and the sanctity of conscience, its opposition to the devices of platform politics, and its sense of the importance of a church that ministers to the whole nation.

In conclusion, it will be worthwhile to sum up the evidence against the imputation of Anglo-Catholic eucharistic teaching to the Carolines, the Non-Jurors and the Wesleys. In the first place, it is demonstrable that all these schools of writers, when their writings are seen as a whole and not merely in carefully selected extracts, explicitly repudiate the doctrines of a real presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements and a literal sacrifice of Christ's body and blood, and assert something quite different. The Carolines held views of Christ's presence ranging between receptionism and virtualism, and a metaphorical view of the eucharistic sacrifice. These were also the views of Dean Brevint, on whose treatise the Wesleys deliberately and explicitly based their eucharistic hymns. The Non-Jurors, on the other hand, maintained both a real presence in the elements and a literal sacrifice, but the real presence was a presence of the Holy Spirit, and the literal sacrifice was a sacrifice of bread and wine. For the evidence on which these assertions are based, see the present writer's book *Priesthood and Sacraments* (Abingdon, Marcham Books, 1964), chapters two and five.

In the second place, the very passages in these older writers which are invoked in proof of their Anglo-Catholic views often prove the contrary. When, for example, the Wesleys write in Hymn 89 that 'The altar streams with sacred blood', they manifestly do not mean that the communion wine is running all over the holy table.

In the third place, the great opponent of the eucharistic teaching of the Non-jurors was Daniel Waterland. But Waterland recommends Brevint's writings (on which the Wesleys based their eucharistic hymns) as an unequalled exposition of his own views. See his *Works*, 1843 edition, vol. 5, p. 139f.

To these three arguments, which the writer has reproduced from his book mentioned above, it is possible to add two others. The

first (which was suggested to the writer by Dr. Packer) is that if the Wesleys had adopted 'Catholic' views on the eucharist, or had used language about the eucharist which was not in the eighteenth century readily interpreted in a Protestant sense, one would have expected their Calvinistic critics to point this out. The *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* went through ten editions between 1745 and 1794, so must have been widely known. Other hymns of the Wesleys are cited by their opponents, Wesley's baptismal practice is criticised by them, and they charge him with Roman Catholic tendencies in other matters. They by no means confine themselves to his views on predestination—indeed one of these works against him is called *A Review of All the Doctrines taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley*. Yet in all that was written against him by William Cudworth, James Hervey, Augustus Toplady, Caleb Evans, Sir Richard and Rowland Hill, the writer has not been able to discover one criticism of his eucharistic opinions.

The remaining argument is that the language which is given a 'Catholic' meaning when quoted from the Carolines, the Non-jurors and the Wesleys can also be found, though less frequently, in writers whose Protestantism is undisputed. In the writings of the English Reformers, it is of course easy to find language which, taken out of its context, suggests the real presence, but it is also possible to find language which suggests the sacrifice of the mass. Thus Ridley, whom (with all respect to the Bishop of Willesden) no Reformation scholar suspects of harbouring Anglo-Catholic views, uses these words: 'And whereas you allege out of Chrysostom, that Christ is offered in many places at once . . . I grant it to be true' and again (in answer to the question, What say you to that council, where it is said, that the priest doth offer an unbloody sacrifice of the body of Christ?): 'I say, it is well said, if it be rightly understood . . . and he doth not lie, who saith Christ to be offered' (*Works*, Parker Society, pp. 217, 250). These passages come from Ridley's Disputation with his enemies at Oxford in 1555, where he was possibly not using language which he would have chosen himself, but they show that (following the Fathers) he was prepared to use it, provided he was also allowed to explain it. Anyone who turns up these passages will see that he explains very plainly the sense in which he uses it. Much the same is true of Cranmer and Jewel. Cranmer, commenting on a passage from Peter Lombard, writes: 'It is but one Christ that was offered then, and that is offered now' (*On the Lord's Supper*, Parker Society, p. 359), and Jewel writes: 'We deny not but it may well be said, "Christ at his last supper offered up himself unto his Father"' (quoting Hesychius), and again: 'the ministration of the holy mysteries, in a phrase and manner of speech, is also the same sacrifice', and yet again: 'Thus we offer up Christ' (commenting on Chrysostom). These passages are to be found in the second volume of the Parker Society edition of Jewel's *Works*, on pp. 718, 726, 729, where Jewel, like Cranmer, explains very clearly the Protestant interpretation on which alone he can accept this language.

Even the Puritans, who had such a fine nose for popery, were prepared on occasion to speak in the same manner. In Dimock's *Missarum Sacrificia* (London, Elliot Stock, 1896), p. 230, there are to be found two passages of like character from the writings of William

Perkins and Richard Baxter. With these passages we will end. Perkins wrote: 'In this sense the faithful, in their prayers, do offer Christ as a sacrifice unto God the Father for their sins, in being wholly carried away in their minds and affections unto that only true Sacrifice, thereby to procure and obtain God's greater favour unto them' (*Works*, 1617 edition, vol. 2, p. 551). Baxter's words are these: 'He hath ordained . . . that by faith and prayer they might, as it were, offer Him up to God—that is, might show the Father that sacrifice, once made for sin, in which they trust' (*Works*, 1830 edition, vol. 4, p. 316).