Practical Catholicism: John Wesley's Theology of Bishops Reconsidered

Eric Richard Griffin

From his own time until today, the degree to which John Wesley's theology may be characterized as 'catholic' has been the subject of much study. Too often, however, a party either clasping Wesley to its breast as a kindred spirit, or condemning him out of hand, has had to ignore important elements in his thought, thereby distorting the fullest expression of Wesley's highly nuanced, and at times, changing position. To say that John Wesley was a 'catholic' in some special sense, being opposed both to some Protestants and to Rome, is a very slippery idea; yet it is one which several have thought has merit.

Wesley is generally referred to as being 'High Church'. In a letter to the Earl of Dartmouth (1775), Wesley wrote: 'I am an High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman...'[1] Today, it may not always be particularly clear what exactly was meant by this term.

The term 'High Church' is often used nowadays to denote the 'Catholicism' end of the Anglican theological and liturgical spectrum, but to apply 'High Church' to Wesley in this way is anachronistic. It must be remembered that the Tractarian and Ritualist movements stand between us and Wesley's own time, and that the term 'High Church' has since acquired a new meaning, or at least connotation, often referring in the twentieth century to the adoption of a complex, ornate ceremonial, in an apparent effort to reconcile the *Book of Common Prayer* with the Council of Trent. The word 'catholic', when applied to Anglicans, has for the same reasons shifted in meaning, and we must resist the anachronistic temptation to read Wesley from a post-Oxford Movement perspective.[2]

'High Church' is also applied to what some have called the 'classical' expression of Anglicanism as it is found, for example, in the *Homilies*, and in the writings of Hooker, Jewel, Andrewes, Cosin, Taylor, *et al*, with all of

1 *The Letters of Rev John Wesley AM* Standard Edition VI John Telford ed (London: 1931) p 156

2 Ernest Rattenbury *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth 1948) p 3

whom Wesley was familiar and in substantial agreement. More importantly, however, it can also indicate a political stance, an Erastian or Tory allegiance to the Established Church. That Wesley was a High Churchman in both these senses is beyond doubt, though it shall be seen, decreasingly so in later life.

John Wesley always proclaimed himself to be a loyal and loving member of the Church of England, which he considered to be the most primitive and apostolical church in the world. The Methodists were not to be a sect or a party, but rather what Outler considers to be an order within Anglicanism, and although the issue of Methodist separation often arose, Wesley thought it would be a sin for them to leave the Church of England. In 1758 he published his *Reasons Against a Separation From the Church of England*,[3] consisting of 12 arguments, more practical than theological in nature.[4] In 1789, after his controversial ordinations, he published a sermon on 'The Ministerial Office' in which he reasserted:

> I hold all the doctrine of the Church of England. I love her liturgy. I approve her plan of discipline, and only wish it could be put in execution. I do not knowingly vary from any rule of the Church, unless in those few instances, where I judge, and as far as I judge, there is an absolute necessity.[5]

Here is an explicit admission that his actions were often based on both their context and his own conscience. Wesley stated to Alexander Knox that should the Methodists separate from the Church of England, he would separate himself from Methodism.[6] But as shall be seen, Wesley's breach with church discipline only served to give stronger impetus to the inevitable schism.

Wesley and Roman Catholicism

Throughout his ministry Wesley was accused of trying to subvert the Church of England and of trying covertly to establish Roman Catholicism in England. Tracts such as *The Jesuit Detected: The Church of Rome discover'd in the disguise of a Protestant*[7] (1773) and *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compared*[8] (1749) accused him of being a papist in

3 *Works* XIII p 225
4 Sparrow Simpson *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: 1934) p 12
5 *Works* VII p 278
6 Sparrow Simpson p 12
7 Richard P Heizenrater *The Elusive Mr Wesley* vol II (Nashville: Abingdon) pp 97ff
8 George Lavingdon, Bishop of Exeter. Wesley replied several times, starting in 1750. It was reprinted in the nineteenth century, when new tracts appeared, such as *The Popery of Methodism* and *John Wesley the Papa of British Rome*. In his journal entry of 19 November 1751, Wesley remarked that he had begun a reply to Lavingdon.

Protestant disguise, primarily by characterizing his teaching on sanctification as justification by works, a common anti-Roman epithet.

Yet apart from this prejudice, real affinities between Wesley and Roman Catholicism may truly be seen. First of all, the evangelical revival was also a sacramental revival, and a too eager desire for communion would be held as suspect by many with latitudinarian or Presbyterian tendencies. Wesley understood the Eucharist to have a real sacrificial nature, and encouraged both frequent reception and the observance of the eucharistic fast. Furthermore, he supported many practices which had become focal points for Protestant polemic, such as auricular confession, the mingled chalice and prayers for the dead.

Wesley was thoroughly familiar with the patristic authors, whom he was able to use readily, and to whom he regularly appealed in matters of doctrinal authority. For him, the Bible and the Fathers constituted the final word in most matters. He was also well-read in traditional Roman Catholic spiritual classics, an enthusiasm formed in him by his parents' reading of authors such as Pascal and Brother Lawrence.[9] The French mystics had a strong influence on Wesley, who was sympathetic with the Roman Catholic spiritual tradition, and he knew well the works of several continental spiritual writers such as de Renty, Frances de Sales, Fenelon, Saint Cyran and others, scattered references to whom crop up from time to time in his works, and to whom Orcibal attributes Wesley's doctrine of sanctification.[10] Finally, both Methodism and Roman Catholicism have strong experiential elements in their piety, which would make nervous those more inclined to the emotional detachment of a largely intellectual faith.

There are many possible reasons why Wesley's antagonists condemned him as a crypto-papist. Certainly it was not because he was teaching anything foreign to the traditions of the Church of England, for there was very little actual innovation in Wesley's doctrine. Yet by trying to show affinities between Methodism and Roman Catholicism, his detractors hoped to draw on general English anti-Catholicism in order to transfer that resistance to the new movement. Despite the fact that the Reformation was 200 years old, the English fear of popery was very strong, and has never been far below the surface. The hysteria over the 'Popish Plot' in 1678 was

9 Perhaps they knew Lawrence's *De imitation Christi* in its protestantized version, translated by Thomas Rogers, which was one of the most popular works of 'practical divinity' amongst English puritans from the 1580s to the early 1600s; Elizabeth Hudson 'The *Plaine Mans* Pastor: Arthur Dent and the Cultivation of Popular Piety in Early Seventeenth-Century England' *Albion* 25 (1993) p 23

10 Jean Orcibal 'The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality' *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* vol I Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp edd (London: 1965) p 103

within living memory, and there was much contemporary uneasiness regarding 'The Old Pretender' and his son Bonnie Prince Charlie. Calvinists objected both to his understanding of sanctification and his outspoken rejection of predestination, feeling that he had thereby betrayed Protestantism itself; they broke with him in 1770 over his 'papist theology'.[11] R A Knox said that Wesley's Arminianism 'will carry a man to Rome' [12] and predicted that Wesley would end up a papist.[13]

The controversy which raged in England surrounding the accusations of Wesley's supposed Romanism is not to be underestimated, and Wesley's Journal tells how it troubled him, both the conflict itself and the being so misunderstood. Burrows recalls the 'backhanded compliment' given to Wesley in 1748, when a man hearing Wesley preach in Dublin declared, 'Ay, he is a Jesuit that's plain', and the Catholic priest standing near replied, 'No he is not; I would to God he was'.[14]

But there is much more to Roman Catholicism than simply these few affinities, and many Catholic clergy warned their people vehemently against the dangers of Methodism (especially, one presumes, after the two had been associated in the tracts). The irony is that Wesley himself was 'typically English' in his dislike of Rome, and he openly and vigorously repudiated the Roman Catholic Church, as did his brother. When Charles' son, the composer Samuel Wesley, briefly converted to Rome (for it seems reasons more aesthetical than theological[15]), Charles was deeply grieved and angered. John's treatises *Popery Calmly Considered*, and *The Advantages of the Members of the Church of England over those of the Church of Rome* have a very polemical spirit, as does the longer *A Roman Catechism with a Reply Thereto* which, though published by him, is in fact his abridgement of Bishop John Williams' *A Catechism Truly Representing the Doctrines and Practices of the Church of Rome: With an Answer Thereunto* (1686). Besides explicitly rejecting sacerdotalism and doctrines such as transubstantiation, Wesley also opposed the civil toleration of Roman Catholics in 1780.[16] On account of this, Wesley was held to be partially responsible for the Gordon Riots in London that year.[17] Forasmuch as he might oppose their persecution, and even offer them the right hand of fellowship in the 'catholic spirit', he said also: 'I wish papists

11 Orcibal 'Theological Originality' pp 102-3
12 See also Ronald Knox *Let Dons Delight* (1939) for a satirical reference to this statement.
13 Burrows 'Wesley the Catholic' p 66
14 Burrows 'Wesley the Catholic' p 66
15 Teresa Berger 'Charles Wesley and Roman Catholicism' *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* S T Kimbrough Jr ed (Nashville: 1992) p 211
16 Wesley 'A Letter Occasioned by the Late Act Passed in Favour of Popery' in Mark S Massa 'The Catholic Wesley: A Revisionist Prolegomena' *Methodist History* 22 (1988) p 41
17 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 41

to enjoy the same tolerations as all; I would not persecute a hair of their head... I wish them well, but I dare not trust them.'[18] In his sermon 'Of the Church' (1786) Wesley wrote:

> I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines which cannot be affirmed to be 'the pure Word of God' are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered' [Article XIX]. Certainly if these things are so, the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic Church, seeing therein neither is 'the pure Word of God' preached, nor the sacraments 'duly administered'.
>
> Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father all', I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious forms of worship. Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church; neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England.[19]

As with much of his theology, Wesley's toleration of Roman Catholics was largely practical.[20] He was not interested in whipping up religious intolerance, and his interest in offering the right hand of fellowship was primarily for pastoral, not ecclesiological, reasons. He vigorously rejected the idea that Roman Catholics were 'lost', generally naming the French spiritual writers as examples of some whom one could not imagine being denied heaven. In his 'Letter to a Roman Catholic', Wesley encouraged external fellowship and peace, though without offering to solve internal doctrinal conflict. Thus he is seen to have been at once anti-Roman, yet expressing the 'catholic spirit' towards Roman Catholics.

The Tractarians

Wesley has often had his name joined with the Tractarians as the leader of an earlier 'Oxford Movement', and to have anticipated much in Anglo-Catholicism; but it is a post-Tractarian temptation to equate Wesley with them. Nevertheless, a comparison with Wesley has often been drawn.[21] Piette claims that Wesley paved the way for this second Oxford Movement

18 Wesley 'A Disavowal of Persecuting Papists' *Works* X pp 173-5
19 *Works* VI pp 392-401
20 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 48
21 For example, M Piette *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (London: 1938) p 476; Evelyn Underhill *Worship* (1937) p 303, quoted in Paul Sanders 'Wesley's Eucharistic Faith and Practice' *Anglican Theological Review* (1966) p 157

called 'ritualism'[22] and at least one book has explicitly drawn up parallel columns, showing strong affinities in teaching between the Anglo-Catholics and John Wesley, based on the seven sacraments.[23] There has been amongst American Episcopalians from the Oxford Movement tradition, a revival of interest in Wesley's catholic churchmanship this century,[24] but, notes Wakefield, the early Tractarians such as Newman, Pusey and Keble would not have had much sympathy for Wesley and the early Methodists. Even so:

> On the importance of discipline, of prayer and fasting, regular offices, a central, indeed daily, Eucharist, and an admiration for the Fathers, and some rather eccentric characters of the Catholic Reformation, the Tractarians could have taught him [Wesley] nothing.[25]

Wesley's friend Alexander Knox has been suggested as a tangible connection between John Wesley and Tractarianism, along with their mutual reliance on the thought of the English non-jurors, especially William Law. Dearing has stated that Tractarianism is in some ways a sequel to the eighteenth-century evangelical revival,[26] noting their common appeal both to the *Book of Common Prayer* and to the early Fathers, as 'providing norms for all time'.[27]

Bishops

The subject of episcopacy often dominates discussions involving 'catholics' of many denominations, and it shall, I hope, provide a good example of his 'practical catholicism'.

Much of the controversy in England during the latter years of the eighteenth century centred on Wesley's ordinations, and his actions only served to hasten the separation of the Methodists from the Church of England after his death. There is today still some debate over Wesley's intentions in this respect, whether he intended to make bishops or not. What cannot be denied however, is that what he did, even if theologically

22 M Piette *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* trans J B Howard (London: Sheed and Ward 1938) p 476

23 *John Wesley in Company with High Churchmen* (London: 1869)

24 Kenneth E Rowe Introduction to *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* pp 1-2

25 Gordon S Wakefield 'A Mystical Substitute for the Glorious Gospel? A Methodist Critique of Tractarianism' in *Tradition Renewed: The Oxford Movement Conference Papers* Geoffry Rowell ed (Allison Park: 1986) p 185

26 Trevour Dearing *Wesleyan and Tractarian Worship: An Ecumenical Study* (London: 1966) p 12

27 Dearing *Wesleyan and Tractarian Worship* p 98

defensible, was certainly outside the discipline of the Church of England. Although he thought hard about his actions, I believe that he simply presumed too much for himself.

Part of the problem undoubtedly was that he was not himself under the authority of a territorial diocesan bishop, and therefore saw himself as responsible for the pastoral supervision of the Methodist societies in both England and America; in effect a bishop with a specific diocese or jurisdiction, yet spiritual rather than geographical. If the Methodists were to remain, as Wesley wanted, truly members of the Church of England, then the pastoral care of the Societies should have naturally fallen to the bishops in whose dioceses the members lived. Had Wesley been as obedient to the Church as he claimed, and had the bishops been sympathetic, then he should have left it to them. The bishops' hostility to the Methodists may have been the main reason why Wesley himself assumed and continued the pastoral oversight of the Methodists, effectively placing them under two masters.

In the same way in which he justified the ministries of his lay preachers, Wesley felt himself to have an 'extraordinary call' to episcopal ministry.

> He understood his own mission primarily as that of a minister extraordinary, called forth by God to help remedy the insufficiencies of the ordinary ministry of the established church. This made him something rather like the superior-general of an evangelical order within a regional division of the church catholic.[28]

Wesley also claimed the privilege of his ordination as a Fellow of Oxford, the license of the Chancellor of the University giving him the right to preach in any part of the Church of England without breaking any human law.[29] Had he been a parish priest, he would have perhaps felt more constrained, as indeed Charles was and did. John's statement in his early ministry that 'I look upon all the world as my parish' may help to explain his self-understanding.[30]

The American revolution proved to be a crisis for Wesley. He virulently opposed the rebels, and published 13 Royalist tracts and open letters against them. Yet for all his Tory churchmanship, he presumed to feel bound to provide the republican American Methodists with ministers, partly so that they would not be deprived of valid sacraments; but also, says Outler, because he feared losing his influence, both in America and at home. Outler's discussion is worth repeating:

28 Outler *John Wesley* (Oxford: OUP 1964) p 306
29 Outler *John Wesley* pp 21(n), 349
30 *Journal* 11 June 1739

> American independence weakened Wesley's control over the American Methodists and at the same time strengthened the hand of the separatists in the Methodist societies in Britain (many of whom had been sympathizers with the American cause). Wesley's 'ordinations' for America in 1784 are better understood in *this* light than in terms of his general doctrine of the ministry. For one thing, the American Methodists – never well cared for by the colonial clergy – now had no church home in which they might receive the sacraments. The Church of England was moving very slowly in its arrangements for American bishops, and was altogether adverse to Wesley's proposal that some of *his* preachers be ordained for ministerial service in the new nation. In this situation, therefore, there was an urgent need for Wesley to restore his authority in America, as far as this was possible.[31]

In the 1775 letter to the Earl of Dartmouth cited above, Wesley wrote that force should not be used against the Americans: 'All my prejudices are against the Americans...and yet...I cannot avoid thinking (If I think at all) that an oppressed people asked for nothing more than their legal rights...'

Both American Episcopalians and John Wesley appealed to the Bishop of London to consecrate a bishop for America, but were refused on the grounds that any bishop would have to take an oath of allegiance to the Crown. Thus on 15 September 1784, at 4 am, during the Methodist Conference at Bristol, Wesley, assisted by two other Church of England presbyters, James Creighton and Thomas Coke, ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey deacons for America. The next day, and at the same time with the same people, they were ordained elders. Then with Creighton and the two newly ordained elders Wesley 'set apart' Coke as superintendent for the American congregations.

Wesley ordained three men for Scotland in 1785, and two more in 1786 as well as one each for Newfoundland and Antigua. During the time of the Conference of 1788, Wesley ordained seven men as deacons and elders, some for the West Indies, Scotland and Ireland; but one of them, Alexander Mather, for England. The other ordinations aside, in this latter he encroached on the authority of the English bishops, and had no legal right so to do. It seems however, that Wesley intended Mather to be a superintendent like Coke, but for England, perhaps to be Wesley's successor. 'The point is quite clear, however, that Wesley had taken steps to set up an ordained ministry for English Methodism after his death.'[32]

31 Outler *John Wesley* pp 24-5
32 Frank Baker *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth 1970) p 281

Wesley did what he did because of his perception of a need that only he could fill. A situation existed in America, he wrote, that would never exist in England.[33] He had, however, come to one theological conclusion some years before; he had become convinced that bishops and presbyters were different only in degree, not order. The ministry of *episkope* was a function of the presbyterate, or in other words, all presbyters were bishops and had the authority to ordain. He had not always believed this. Both Wesleys had once been staunch supporters of the historic episcopate and the apostolic pedigree of the succession of bishops. They published a book on this subject on 30 December 1745, expressing very high and rigid views regarding bishops and the threefold order. Three weeks later, John read *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* written by Peter King, first published in 1691. From this, and from his reading in 1755 of Bishop Edward Stillingfleet's *The Irenicon, a Weapon Salve for the Church's Wounds* (1659), he was convinced that no particular form of church government had been ordained by the gospel, that the idea of episcopal succession was a pious fiction, and that in the Apostolic Church, bishops and priests differed not at all. Although King later retracted this position, and Thompson states that Wesley in fact misread King, and that King's book does not justify John's actions,[34] nevertheless, Wesley remained convinced. This is much the same position held by Jeremy Taylor in his *Episcopacy Asserted*, and in the Lutheran confessions, which, like Stillingfleet, make explicit reference to the passage in St Jerome, in which it is stated that the presbyters in the church in Alexandria elected one from amongst themselves and placed him on a higher grade.

Nevertheless, John Wesley still held that the episcopal form of government was both scriptural and apostolical; agreeable to, but not prescribed by, the Scriptures and the primitive church.

In a letter to Charles, dated 19 August 1785, regarding Charles' concern over John's ordinations, John wrote:

> Some obedience I always paid to the bishops in obedience to the laws of the land. But I cannot see that I am under any obligation to obey them further than those laws require. It is in obedience to those laws that I have never exercised in England the power which I believe God has given me. I firmly believe I am a scriptural *episkopos* as much as any man in England or in Europe; for the *uninterrupted succession* I know to be a fable, which no man ever

33 Letter to Barnabas Thomas 25 March 1785 *Letters* VII p 262

34 Edgar W Thompson *Wesley: Apostolic Man. Some Reflections on Wesley's Consecration of Dr Thomas Coke* (London: 1957) p 30

> did or can prove. But this does in no wise interfere with my remaining in the Church of England; from which I have no more desire to separate than I had fifty years ago... I submit still (though sometimes with a doubting conscience) to 'mitred infidels'. I do, indeed, vary from them in some points of doctrine and in some points of discipline... but not an hair's breadth further from them than I believe to be meet, right, and my bounden duty.[35]

Wesley's opinion of episcopal ministry was high; for him the sacraments, both baptism and the Eucharist, were valid only if 'episcopally administered'. Despite his denial of the necessity of episcopal government for the church, it was ironically his high view of succession which led him to commission his own superintendent. He believed himself to be as 'real a Christian bishop as the Archbishop of Canterbury'[36] and that he himself had valid orders to confer, because he had been ordained episcopally. Yet in keeping with other elements of his thinking, he disliked the title of bishop. In an angry letter to Asbury (20 September 1788) whom Coke had ordained deacon and elder and finally superintendent in Baltimore at Christmastide 1784, Wesley wrote: 'Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content: But they shall never, by my consent, call me a bishop!'[37] (This did not, however, prevent the American Conference in 1789 from assigning to Wesley the 'episcopal office in the Methodist Church in Europe'.[38])

Despite Wesley's fury over Asbury's assumption of the title 'bishop', the question remains today whether or not the conferral of episcopal orders was in effect Wesley's intention. The term 'set apart' may be revealing; in the modern church, the term 'set apart' has been used, in the days before the ordination of women, to make deaconesses, so that there would be no confusion with the conferring of holy orders. Wesley's reticence over publically using the term 'ordained' might be of significance, except that in his journal entries for the days when he set apart deacons and elders, he privately recorded 'ordained'.[39] Some say that by his ordinations he intended episcopacy, and therefore a new church.[40] I disagree: Wesley wanted no schism with the Church of England, although he had admitted in 1755 that to exercise his authority to ordain would in fact be schismatic.[41] He believed that he was sending ministers with valid orders to America to consecrate others, because they had themselves regular valid

35 *Letters* VII p 284
36 Letter to Barnabas Thomas *Letters* VII p 262
37 *Works* VIII p 75
38 *Dictionary of National Biography* IV p 704
39 Baker *John Wesley and the Church of England* pp 276, 280
40 Thompson *Apostolic Man*
41 Baker *John Wesley and the Church of England* p 257

orders. The real question is whether Wesley believed that by his 'setting apart' he was adding anything to Coke which Coke did not already have. According to his own understanding of episcopal orders, he was not, for all presbyters are *episkopoi*.

In his preface to the American Sunday Service, Wesley said that since there were now no bishops or parish clergy in America, to baptize or to administer the Lord's Supper, 'I violate no order and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest'.[42] Since Americans were freed from the entanglements of state and the English hierarchy, 'we dare not intangle them again' and they were now free to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church.[43] Without the English Crown, Wesley felt that there was also no *English* Church: just 'the Church' as such.

That Wesley thought he was providing for an extension of this same Church, albeit beyond the pale of the monarchy, is clearly evinced in the abridged liturgy and Articles which he provided for the use of the American congregations, and the letter he prefaced to them. Some of his abridgements of the Articles reflected the new American situation, and others his own variation from Church of England doctrine. Their agreement in substance with Anglican doctrine and worship is extensive, but according to Blankenship, the abridgement inclines Wesley neither to Roman Catholicism nor to Calvinism.[44]

Because Wesley overstepped his authority and presumed too much, his actions resulted in conflict. American Episcopalians finally achieved their goal of having a bishop ordained for them in the person of Samuel Seabury, a Church of England priest resident in New York. Having been rebuffed by the English bishops, he finally received regular episcopal ordination from Scottish non-juring bishops on 14 November 1784, only two months after Coke was commissioned. Seabury found on his return that the Methodist followers of Coke and Asbury refused to join him. Schism was built into Wesley's presumption that the duty to provide ministers fell to him alone, and his lifelong assertion that Methodism must remain in the Church was thwarted because he had set up a parallel episcopal (though Charles called it 'presbyterian'[45]) authority, forcing American Methodists to choose between Seabury and Coke.

Thus Wesley had a high (though he would assert primitive) theology of

42 James F Whitney ed *John Wesley's Sunday Services of the Methodists in North America* (1984) ii. Wesley's letter is dated 10 September 1784.

43 Whitney *Wesley's Sunday Services* iii

44 Paul F Blankenship 'The Significance of John Wesley's Abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles as seen from his Deletions' *Methodist History* 2 (1964) p 45

45 Baker *John Wesley and the Church of England* p 275

episkope, though it was not a separate order of ministry. However, ordaining one for England was over the top; his constant assertion of his loyalty to the Church of England was now cast into serious question. Charles was never reconciled to John's actions, and Mather, it is to be noted, was ordained for England by John, only after Charles' death.

It was largely his high view of the connection between episcopal ministry and the validity of the sacraments which led Wesley to his breach of Church of England discipline. He felt revulsion at the idea of a layperson presiding at the Eucharist, and consistently resisted the pressure on him to allow Methodist lay preachers to celebrate the sacrament. Since American Methodists needed the Eucharist, and needed it often, they needed episcopally ordained elders. He was drawn to commission his own bishops because he refused to allow the unordained to celebrate,[46] and said at the Methodist conference of 1760 that he would rather commit murder than permit a layman to preside at the Eucharist.[47]

Conclusion

Was John Wesley a catholic? In many ways, yes, particularly in his high view of validity and episcopal orders. As Burrows has written: '[O]ne must... admit within John Wesley, the presence of the essential substance of Catholic faith, life, and worship.'[48] On the other hand, many Roman Catholic definitions of 'Catholicism' depend heavily on issues such as ecclesial unity and authority. On the former, Wesley was ambiguous. He wanted no inter-church conflict, and was willing to offer the right hand of fellowship to all Christians despite doctrinal differences. Yet this sort of ecumenism is in a sense a false one, because there is no real overcoming of the obstacles to true unity and intercommunion in the mere refusal to face conflict. The pursuit of true catholicity, it seems to me, means the attempt to surmount, not simply to ignore, doctrinal separation. On the issue of ecclesial authority, Wesley's opinions and practices changed. Though he asserted his obedience to the Church of England, he deliberately broke discipline, which was a material cause of the schism with the Methodist societies. So for all his averred High Churchmanship, he might well be labelled a dissenter, although he would have been appalled by the idea.

All the same, there was also a strong and explicitly 'Protestant' edge to Wesley, beyond simple anti-Romanism. By way of an example relevant to this immediate study, much may be seen in his changes to the *Book of Common Prayer* for the use of the American Methodists. He removed all

46 Sanders 'Wesley's Eucharistic Faith and Practice' pp 172-3
47 Baker *John Wesley and the Church of England* p 257
48 Burrows 'Wesley the Catholic' p 65

references to the Apocrypha but one, Tobit 4:8-9, and it was retained only as an offertory sentence; he deleted the word 'regenerate' from Baptism; he used the terms 'superintendent', 'elder', and 'deacon' rather than 'bishop', 'priest' and 'deacon'; he omitted Confirmation altogether, along with any references to godparents; he deleted the observation of Lent, Saints' Days, Advent, and Ash Wednesday; he altered the Absolution, replacing 'you' with 'us'; Morning and Evening Prayer were no longer daily offices but Sunday Services only. As well in the Communion Service, if more bread and wine were required, then the whole prayer of consecration was to be repeated, rather than just the words of institution, indicating a shift from the '*verba*' alone to the whole eucharistic action itself.[49] All references to vesture were removed from the Ordinal. In all of this there is an explicit shift ecclesiologically away from clericalism and from all signs of priestly power.[50]

Nevertheless, I also think Rigg's thesis to be both incorrect and narrow-minded, that after Aldersgate Wesley became a true Protestant, repudiating all 'hierarchical superstition', that any catholic elements remaining in his thought after 1738 were simply the 'Rags of Popery'. Massa states that Wesley would have been surprised to hear it.[51] I suspect Rigg's polemic arises out of nineteenth-century Anglican-Methodist dialogue, and a fear of Tractarianism.[52] In 1934 Sparrow Simpson wrote:

> During the nineteenth century the tendency on the Anglican side was to overstress the identities between John Wesley's teaching and that of the Church, and on the Methodist side, to overstress the difference.[53]

Modern works too have attempted to show how Wesley's thought and fundamental Roman Catholic teaching are essentially congruous, but have done so in admiration rather than condemnation.[54] Massa rejects as naive, even insidious, those studies from the first half of this century because they tend to emphasize polemically only the non-Protestant elements. Wesley is not, he says, the closet papist his catholic admirers and Protestant critics would have us believe.[55] Yet, continues Massa, there has been some admirable recent Roman Catholic work on Wesley which confirms Outler's thesis regarding Wesley's transcendence of 'the old Reformation polarities'.[56]

49 Whitney *Wesley's Sunday Services* p 28
50 Whitney *Wesley's Sunday Services* p 19
51 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 46
52 On the other hand, it appears that *John Wesley in the Company of High Churchmen* was written to reconcile Tractarians to the Anglican-Methodist dialogue.
53 Sparrow Simpson viii
54 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 39
55 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 39
56 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 52

Thus, to note the elements of Catholicism in Wesley is not to imply that he was trying to undo the Reformation. In fact, quite to the contrary, he thought that the Reformation had not gone far enough. The Church of England had been purged of Romanism, but traces of 'Constantinianism' remained. 'The Jerusalem Church was Wesley's supreme model of primitive Christianity.'[57] Wesley was however no restitutionist, and he was opposed to those who wanted to restore a supposed original purity to the church, which he saw as both artificial and naive. Moreover, it was not the joining of the church to the State which marked the Constantinian Fall, but rather the flood of riches and power into the church.[58] Wesley wanted the church to be further reformed, according to the Scriptures and the teachings of the early Fathers. In support of this, Rattenbury states that: 'The Catholicism of the Wesleys, however, was never Medieval, but always anteNicene.'[59] Thus his Catholicism may be seen in effect as a continuation of the Reformation.

To assert that Wesley was either a classical Protestant or a proto-Tractarian catholic is simply incorrect. Outler offers the admittedly fuzzy label of 'evangelical Catholicism' for Wesley's distinctive doctrinal perspective.[60] Or as Borgen puts it:

> To tie Wesley to any one line of thought and call him, for instance, Lutheran, Calvinist (Reformed), or Catholic will always be a distortion; he is so much of an eclectic that he belongs to all – and still has a theology uniquely his own.[61]

Encouragingly, Wesley's unique synthesis of evangelical Catholicism is still to be found in Methodist theologians even today: Stanley Hauerwas for instance has stated that all true theology is neither Protestant nor Catholic,[62] and modern Methodism, because of its Protestant-Catholic synthesis, stands in a peculiar position to 'bind up the wounds of the Reformation'[63] (a position Lutherans and Anglicans have also customarily taken). Affinities between Catholicism and Protestantism still exist in the spirit of Wesley, and it is here that catholicity and Catholicism coincide: his perspective says Massa, could provide a wonderful model for inter- confessional dialogue.[64]

57 Duke L Keefer 'John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19 (1984) p 28
58 Keefer 'Disciple' p 29
59 Rattenbury *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* p 14
60 Outler *John Wesley* iv
61 Borgen *John Wesley on the Sacraments* p 48
62 Stanley Hauerwas *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: 1983) xxvi
63 Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon 'Why *Resident Aliens* Struck a Chord' *Missiology* 19 (1991) p 427
64 Massa 'Prolegomena' p 39

As Wakefield has pointedly remarked: '[Y]ou would be surprised to hear what Roman Catholics and Methodists say to one another when there are no Anglicans present.'[65]

ERIC GRIFFIN is Rector of St Margaret's, Hamilton, Ontario.

65 Wakefield 'Methodist Critique of Tractarianism' p 196