Hermeneutics in the Wesleyan Understanding

**WESLEY’S HERMENEUTICS**

For John Wesley the Bible was the primary but not exclusive Christian authority. His famous assertion *homo unius libri* - a man of one book, has not always been understood and has frequently been quoted out of context. Literalism has extended to this statement which is usually first encountered by Methodists in Wesley's Preface to his sermons. But Wesley did not speak of *homo unius libri* in a literalistic or absolutist way. He did quote scripture more than any other literary source but never exclusively. His writings contain quotations from the Christian tradition in all its ecumenical diversity as well as from secular sources. The English authors Milton and Pope are quoted as are the great classical writers Virgil, Horace and Plato. In one use of the phrase *homo unius libri*, Wesley follows quickly with an extensive quotation from the Greek text of Homer's Iliad. The Christian Library provided for his preacher's highlights his expectation that Methodist preachers would read a great deal more than the Bible!

It is the primacy of scripture that Wesley affirmed though not as an exclusive authority. Wesley himself did not create the language of the Quadrilateral to express hermeneutical and theological authority, but the Quadrilateral is implicit in his writings if not defined. Tradition, reason and experience, along with scripture were all part of his hermeneutical model. They were, however, not all equal.

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..... this must always be understood as a single locus of authority with four unequal parts. Scripture is primary, and always interpreted in the light of the other three. For Wesley, all four terms are mutually interdependent.1
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The 1996 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church affirms that:

**Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience and confirmed by reason.**

What is affirmed as being consistent with Wesley is a dialogical way of doing theology. The primacy of scripture means that Methodists are still open to scripture's critique of traditions, reasonings and experiences. In other words, tradition, reason and experience are subordinate authorities. This does not reduce the complexity of the Quadrilateral dynamics. Scripture is not interpreted without the trilateral and even when interpreted, always provisional. The authority of the interpretation can never be equated with the authority of scripture, however that is defined. The truth of the interpretation is never ultimate truth or absolute truth. Yet the rule of scripture within the trilateral hermeneutic of tradition, reason and experience is a viable way of theologising for (United) Methodism.2

Wesley read scripture from within his Anglican tradition. Though both the Anglican and Puritan streams flow through Wesley's spiritual formation, his basic biblical hermeneutic was Anglican.

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..... Dissenters, like their Puritan forebears, insisted that scripture is THE authority for EVERYTHING, whereas the Anglican evangelicals emphasised its authority for issues related specifically to salvific knowledge. Scripture is authoritative primarily to relate to us all that we need to know for our salvation.3
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Wesley's context was that of an Anglican-Puritan dispute over scripture. For Anglicans scripture was norm for doctrine and ethics while for Puritans it had authority for all ecclesial and personal life which included the liturgical and the administrative.

For Wesley, scripture was source and norm as it was for Anglicans. Scripture was a source of doctrine as relating to salvation and it was the norm for teaching and behaviour. 'I receive the written Word as the whole and sole rule of my faith.'4

From within his Anglican hermeneutic Wesley read scripture in relation to the doctrine of salvation. Eleven times in his writings he spoke of the 'analogy of faith' by which he meant the 'grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith, and present inward salvation.'5

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Salvation for Wesley focused on the three issues of original sin, justification and sanctification. This 'analogy of faith' was the key to his biblical hermeneutic. Wesley's hermeneutic was a soteriological one and that was essentially Anglican.

**BEYOND WESLEY'S HERMENEUTICS?**

Wesley's hermeneutics in the 18th century are clear. He lived and died an Anglican priest and that shaped his hermeneutical standpoint. Is his hermeneutical approach adequate for the 21st century and is there still a viable Wesleyan hermeneutic?

Wesley practiced his hermeneutic on the border between the pre-critical and critical approach to the Bible. The literal meaning of scripture was central for him yet this should not be confused with naive biblicism. He was no literalist in the fundamentalist sense which is a late 19th and early 20th century phenomenon.

He lived during the beginnings of the critical study of scripture and was exposed to its methods and results during his training at Oxford. He was convinced of the value of reading scripture in its original languages. He understood the issues of textual criticism, using the best available Greek text (Johannes Bengel’s) for his own translation of the New Testament (an update of the Authorised Version!). And he drew upon respected biblical scholarship in preparing both his Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament (OT Notes) and his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (NT Notes).^6

Wesley used the best biblical scholarship of his day, yet he did not live to see and use the more developed 19th century historical critical method. If he lived on the border of the pre-critical and the critical, contemporary Methodists live in the post-critical era. The best of the historical critical methods cannot be lost but contemporary biblical scholarship has moved beyond the critical and it is no longer adequate for the study and interpretation of scripture.

The 21st century world and world views(s) are radically different from those of Wesley's 18th century. The soteriological hermeneutic of Wesley had its strength, not least that it went beyond the Reformation focus on justification or forgiveness of sins. But Wesley's interpretation of soteriology is not adequate for the concerns of 21st century life. Wesley did emphasise the social consequences of salvation but largely in personal even individualistic terms and not as socio-political or communal. Wesley understood the key metaphor of Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of God as 'true religion' by which he meant 'the religion of the heart'.^7 This reading of the metaphor bypasses the socio-economic and political foreground of the Gospels.

If justification was largely confined to forgiveness of personal sins, original sin was read in a similar way and did not address in depth the structural reality of original sin. Likewise sanctification, key to his life and ministry,

*did not move beyond the area of individual or ecclesial life and, even there, was mostly concerned with individual behaviour in everyday private life, as seen from the General Rules. Besides, the meaning of sanctification seemed so exclusively related to the personal soteriological domain that the wider Trinitarian dimensions of sanctification in the historical, social or cultural realm were left out.*^8

This is not to suggest that Wesley's thought cannot and has not been developed. Theodore Runyon has shown the socio-political implications of Wesley’s thought in contemporary society by connecting his insights to issues of human rights, poverty and the rights of the poor, the rights of women and environmental stewardship.\(^9\)

Theodore Weber has shown that Wesleyanism has vast social and political implications and has developed an extensive Wesleyan political ethics, but only by a creative re-thinking of Wesley's theology. For Weber this has meant recovering and developing Wesley's concept of the political image (imago Dei) and integrating it with his understanding of the order of salvation. This goes well beyond Wesley's own political language and hermeneutic, but it could be described as a political ethic in the Wesleyan spirit.\(^10\)
Beyond Wesley's soteriological hermeneutic is a broader understanding of salvation, including a scriptural holiness that connects with political, social, economic and environmental ethical praxis. This requires a socio-political hermeneutic that seriously engages with the social, economic, cultural and political contexts of scripture and their interaction with the contemporary contexts. An exclusively pietistic or devotional reading of the biblical text and of Wesley himself is not adequate for the kind of public theology and ethics required for the 21st century global market place or public square.

Reading lenses need to go beyond the literal, individualistic, pietistic or devotionalised reading strategies. Contemporary Methodists live in a post-Darwin, post-Freudian world. It is also the post-critical world, post-Christendom world and a world where the negative and positive realities of globalisation are primary shapers of our world view.

One way of describing the hermeneutic required for the 21st century world is the historical-metaphorical approach. Beyond the historical critical, the best of which still remains, is the social-scientific study of scripture or a socio-political lens. This will pursue historical meaning in historical context attending to the social structures and social conflicts of Palestine in the time of Jesus or the Greco-Roman world of Corinth or Philippi.

The metaphorical approach not only goes beyond literalism, but connects the symbols and stories of the Bible to social realities, past and present. In other words the Bible can be read as a ‘combination of historical memories and metaphorical narratives.’ The texts also have a surplus of meaning going beyond their particular meaning in their ancient contexts. All of this needs to be combined with critical analysis of contemporary social, economic, cultural and political life.

Contemporary readers of the biblical text will be aware as Wesley was not, of the insights of the sociology of knowledge. We now live out of a standpoint epistemology. We know from where we stand and contemporary Methodists stand in vastly diverse places. Our reading strategies are shaped by our standpoint, which means that the objectivist illusion, with which the academy has lived for a long time, is now shattered. There is a European reading of scripture and also an Asian, African and Latin American reading of the text. The standpoints result in a plurality of interpretations and insights.

Elsa Tamez, a Costa Rican and Methodist biblical scholar complains of the dearth of literature on the letter of James. She believes this is due to the privatised place given to abstract thought in our Western societies. This is not possible in Latin America where the readers of the text are existentially closer to James's hearers than most Western Christians. Indeed:

*James's radical critique of the rich has contributed to this 'crafty theft' of the letter. I know of churches where the letter is skipped over in the liturgies because there are so many rich members in the congregation, and it is very uncomfortable to speak against them when they are sitting in the front seats.*

Sri Lankan Methodist biblical theologian, Wesley Ariarajah, brings a dialogical hermeneutic to his reading of scripture. *'The Bible is the record of a great dialogue,'* *‘Dialogue has always been part and parcel of the Asian understanding of religious life and discipline.’* This leads Ariarajah into creative and genuine dialogue with neighbour religions empowered by his dialogical reading strategy of scripture.

Contemporary Methodists live, not only with the oppressive fall-out of colonialism and the new economic colonialism, and the challenge of inter-faith dialogue, but the deep challenge of feminist theology. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has become a pre-eminent voice of feminist biblical interpretation. Her early groundbreaking book was *'In Memory of Her'* in which she reconstructed Christian origins from a feminist perspective. This meant developing a feminist critical hermeneutic of scripture which she called a *'hermeneutic of suspicion’*. Fiorenza and other women biblical scholars and theologians have brought to the fore the patriarchal context of the biblical world and the patriarchal standpoint of the biblical writers.

In her latest book, Fiorenza describes a hermeneutic of suspicion as:
A deconstructive practice of enquiry that denaturalises and demystifies linguistic - cultural practices of domination ..... It has the task of disentangling the ideological functions of kyriocentric text and commentary.\textsuperscript{16}

Such an approach which she also describes as ‘A critical theo-ethical hermeneutics’ \textsuperscript{17} is suspicious of all textual rhetoric which dominates and oppresses, not just women, but all through ideological interpretation and use of power as domination, or in support of socio-economic or political status quo. A hermeneutic of suspicion is critically subversive of all power/domination structures. It is subversive of the objectivist illusion or academic myth that all scientifically based study, including that of scripture is objective and value-free. A critical hermeneutic of suspicion will only consent to the authority of texts that function in a concrete situation as emancipatory.\textsuperscript{18}

The liberationist hermeneutic of Tamez, dialogical hermeneutic of Ariarajah and the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion of Fiorenza seem a long way from Wesley’s soteriological hermeneutic. These hermeneutical keys belong to a very different world. In that sense contemporary Methodists do need to move beyond Wesley’s hermeneutics. His Anglocentric hermeneutic is inadequate. Also, in the 21st century biblical scholarship and hermeneutics are no longer a Eurocentric project. Nor are androcentric or kyriocentric hermeneutics any longer possible. Wesley still speaks, not least in his emphasis on the primacy of scripture though not as exclusive authority. Yet multiple reading strategies are now required, in one sense going well beyond Wesley. In another sense, these strategies are in continuity with a Wesleyan spirit. The soteriological hermeneutic needs to be broadened. Contemporary Wesleyans ‘know that we need to be saved from patriarchy and racism ..... The basic shift is from a narrow view of salvation from sin to one that recovers the biblical understanding of salvation from all evil.’\textsuperscript{19}

In the 21st century, hermeneutics in the Wesleyan spirit are ecumenical hermeneutics drawing insights from a multiplicity of standpoints within the whole human family.

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References

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2. Ibid, p 142

3. Ibid, Stephen Gunter in The Quadrilateral and the Middle Way, p 17

4. Wesley in a letter to John Smith, Works 26:155

5. Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Romans 12 v 6

6. Maddox, Randy L, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology, (Kingswood Books, 1994) p 37


8. Maddox, Randy L (Ed), Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism, (Kingswood Books, 1998) p 178. The chapter by Jose Miguez Bonino is on Wesley in Latin America. The previous chapter by Justo L Gonzalez asks a pertinent question Can Wesley be Read in Spanish?


13. Ariarajah, S Wesley, The Bible and People of Other Faiths, (Orbis, 1994) p ix from the Foreword by Hans-Ruedi Weber

14. Ibid, p xi from Ariarajah's Introduction


17. Ibid, p 177

18. Ibid, p 177

19. Cobb, op cit, p 32