

SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION.

Spiritual ecumenism is the necessary and indispensable heart of all true ecumenical endeavour. 'There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart' was the teaching of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism¹. Twenty five years earlier, the Abbe Paul Couturier opined that the time was not yet ready for official ecumenical theological dialogue; this, he felt, could only be fruitful when the ground had been prepared by a true change of heart amongst the faithful of the divided churches. Ironically, the Abbe played his part in putting the cart before the horse in his own establishment of a pioneer and, subsequently, immensely influential dialogue group, the Groupe des Dombes. He would, however, probably have emphasised its exploratory and unofficial nature.

Vatican II led, of course, to the establishment of the official dialogues, some of which, for all their excellence and fruitfulness, went ahead of popular understanding within their churches. To an extent, they were right to do so since it is part of the task of a theologian to propose new insights to the Church which must, however, be subject both to the scrutiny of church leaders whose responsibility it is to test such insights for conformity to the Apostolic Tradition and to the test of the consensus fidelium, the reception by all the faithful. However the insights of theologians only become truly fruitful when they are assimilated into the general pattern of Christian life, witness, service and mission by the people of God in their entirety.

Perhaps the greatest need of all the churches is for a much deeper popular reception of spiritual ecumenism in which all Christians come to put their loyalty to Christ and his Universal Church before denominational loyalty and prejudices. What is needed is what John Wesley used to call a 'truly Catholic spirit', the starting point of which, before any theological reconciliation or consensus can be essayed, is the acceptance that 'if we cannot all think alike, let us at least love alike'. Later, Benjamin Gregory reinforced this point. Commenting on Colossians 2:2 he said 'the order is not first to understand then love, but love in order to understand'². The importance of straightforward Christian love, incorporating true humility, patience and receptivity in ecumenical relationships, cannot be over-estimated. Much more attention needs to be given by church leaders and theologians to this. They cannot play their vitally creative roles within the Ecumenical Movement without a real receptivity on the part of all the people of God at the most local level. The ecumenical education of layfolk, particularly the activists in parishes and congregations and those in local lay leadership roles, remains one of the most lamentably underdeveloped aspects of the Ecumenical Movement. In my recent work as County Ecumenical Officer for Bristol (England) I have tried to urge its importance but without real success.

The Methodist contribution to spiritual ecumenism can be encapsulated in the words of a declaration issued by the British Conference in 1820³. At that time, Methodism was growing rapidly, more so than any other Christian tradition, on both sides of the Atlantic. Within certain sections of the Connexion, there was a tendency towards a form of Wesleyan triumphalism mixed with a degree of disparagement of other traditions. It was the aim of the Conference to recall the Methodist people to a due sense of humility before both God and the rest of the Universal Church and to remind them of the dictum of their Founder that the Methodist people are 'the friends of all and the enemies of none'.

¹ Decree on Ecumenism, section 7.

² Gregory, B. *The Holy Catholic Church* (London), 1873, p. 172.

³ It is a paragraph within the famous Liverpool Minutes of 1820.

It is the purpose of this article, with the aid of the thought of the most distinguished British Methodist proto-ecumenist of the period, William Shrewsbury (1785-1866), to expound the continuing relevance of this declaration both for Methodism and for the rest of the Church Universal⁴.

The declaration, expressed in the rather convolutedly formal language of its period, reads as follows:

‘Let us ourselves remember, and endeavour to impress upon our people, that we, as a body, do not exist for the purposes of party; and that we are especially bound by the example of our Founder, by the original principle upon which our Societies are formed, and by our constant professions before the world, to avoid a narrow, bigoted and sectarian spirit, to abstain from needless and unprofitable disputes upon minor subjects of theological controversy, and, as far as we innocently can, to ‘please all men for their good unto edification’. Let us therefore maintain towards all denominations of Christians who ‘hold the Head’ the kind and catholic spirit of primitive Methodism; and, according to the noble maxim of our fathers in the Gospel, be the ‘friends of all and the enemies of none’.

The key sentence is the last one. At a time when Methodists, indeed Protestants in general, still harboured deep doubts as to the authentic Christianity of what they then demeaningly called ‘popery’, it is noteworthy that *all* Trinitarian churches were included in this summons to the Methodist people, the term ‘holding the Head’, referring to the confession of the Lordship of Christ, truly God and truly man. Towards ‘all denominations of Christians’ *without exception* the Methodist people were to show friendship.

The best commentary on the precise meaning of this is to be found in the last chapter of Shrewsbury’s great work. He says ‘A truly *catholic spirit*...has hitherto been the chief glory of Methodism...For though the Methodists are a *sect*, yet they are *not sectarians*;⁵ their business is not to make proselytes from other churches but to convert sinners to Christ; to help one another on in the way to the kingdom; and to assist other Christians of every denomination, who hold the vital truths of Christianity, to get good and to do good, so far as their means and opportunities will allow⁶.

Here Shrewsbury asserts the dual concern of Methodism for conversion and progress in sanctification. He affirms that this is to be done not in competition with other churches but, as far as others may allow and enable, in co-operation with them, the concern of Methodism only being with the way to the kingdom and the sanctification of all the people of God whatever their particular ecclesial belonging.

⁴ I have previously given some account of the ecumenical principles of Shrewsbury in this journal (April 2003)

⁵ The term *sect* is used not in the modern sociological sense or in the sense in which it is sometimes used to deny churchly reality to particular groups but rather in the original sense of something cut from something else, thus reflecting Methodism’s origins within the Church of England and also its position since the 1790’s as a distinct Christian communion

⁶ Shrewsbury, W.J. *An Essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy*, (London), 1840, p. 289.

Shrewsbury insists that the ‘kind and catholic spirit of primitive Methodism’ must be shown to all, even to those who fail totally to respond⁷. He goes on:

‘The noblest exercise of Christian candour is the habit of employing it to search out for the best parts and performances of those whose prejudices place them in a position of hostility to our own favourite system or community. It is the ordinary practice of men to pass by *the excellencies* of those whom they count opponents, and to fix only on their *defects* or weaker points, for the sake of gaining an advantage, a triumph, a victory; and this way of the world has too often been imitated in the Churches of God, and even by the Ministers of the sanctuary. But the Wesleyans have not so learned Christ. It becomes them everywhere to ‘rejoice in the truth’, and wherever they meet it in our common Protestant churches, to honour it, and to observe its *silent and gradual working* with gladness of heart; and it should be their joy to take every fit occasion of speaking of whatever will give *the most favourable impression*, consistently with truth, of every Christian community, and of all Christian Ministers, without excepting those who, it is known beforehand, will only reward such generosity with envy and scorn’.

Shrewsbury’s call is essentially one to apply the principles of the Sermon on the Mount at an inter-ecclesial level, a call to Methodists to set an example to the rest of Christendom in not returning evil for evil but in rather rejoicing to bless even those who curse and always to return only good for evil. Of course, such attitudes have sadly not prevailed universally within Methodism, even in better informed and more ecumenically conscious times, but Shrewsbury’s teaching remains a challenge to all Christians and not just to Methodists. It will be noted that Shrewsbury talks as if such attitudes are only to prevail between Protestant churches and that is a sad comment upon the way in which even a man as well disposed as Shrewsbury himself was not immune from the overwhelmingly common prejudices of his time. However, the immense strides made in mutual rediscovery between Catholics and Methodists, especially since Vatican II, mean that we can now re-receive Shrewsbury’s teaching on a much wider scale than he could ever have anticipated.

It is more, of course, than a simple matter of forgiveness. The Methodist seeks actively not just to affirm all that is good in other Christian communities but to learn from and receive from them. Right from the very beginning, Wesley encouraged the Methodists to learn from spiritual writers of all traditions, even and despite his many criticisms of it, the post-reformation Roman Catholic tradition. Shrewsbury himself gave as an additional argument for Methodist humility and generosity towards others, the fact that they were the debtors of all, particularly to the earlier Anglican high churchmen, to the Puritans and to the continental pietists. At the core of the Methodist understanding of catholicity is the belief that the Holy Spirit is ceaselessly at work throughout the Christian world and that it was a key aspect of the work of the apostles to *recognise* the work of the Spirit wherever they found it and to seek to connect it fruitfully with the total life of the Church. Thus was a particularly strong emphasis in the work of the later Wesleyan theologian, Benjamin Gregory⁸.

⁷ Note the lower case letter, indicating that the Conference of 1820 was talking about the early days of the Methodist revival rather than about the later Primitive Methodist Connexion which came into existence at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

⁸ Expounded at various points in his *The Holy Catholic Church*, (London), 1873, and particularly in respect of the visit paid by Peter and John to those churches which had been formed, independently of any immediately apostolic initiative in Judea and Samaria, as a result of the first persecution in Jerusalem and the ‘scattering abroad’ of so many of the members of the original church at Jerusalem. According to Gregory, they lost no time in recognising and connecting these churches. *Ibid*, p.50.

The Wesleyan claim to catholicity rested upon the twin foundations of the recognition of the work that God had wrought in and through them and the parallel recognition that His work was not limited to their activities but was being carried out through all the other trinitarian churches. At a time when Anglicans, Methodists and dissenters were often at loggerheads with each other and certainly constantly seeking to score points off each other in ecclesiological controversy, Shrewsbury called upon them to combine their forces and to rejoice in the strengths and advantages that each could bring to the common mission.

Long before Cardinal Willebrands developed his famous concept of *typoi* or consistent patterns of integrated discipline, liturgical and devotional styles and theological system as characterising the different churches, Shrewsbury launched his vigorous defence of the polity of Methodism as a new but not exclusive pattern of Christian churchly life that was totally compatible with the Scriptures. He was only too willing, however, to recognise the strong points in others and to advocate the most practical methods of mutual co-operation and the principle of disinterestedness. For Shrewsbury, as for later Methodists, the claim to catholicity involved the claim that Methodism had a special but not exclusive place within God's total providential action across the history of his Church⁹.

Writing in his time, Shrewsbury argued,

‘In this centenary year of Methodism, it would be a genuine proof of a catholic and Christian spirit and temper, were the Wesleyans, in connection with enlarged liberality in support of their own good cause, voluntarily to become, in this new era, annual subscribers to all the great missionary institutions in the kingdom’. He mentioned the fact that the Wesleyans often reported upon the success of the missions of other churches at their own missionary rallies and went on to assert that ‘nothing is wanting to complete the genuine Wesleyan character, but *a more general practical catholicity*, that we may *substantially* aid all those noble societies which we so sincerely love, and so cordially and frequently commend’.

I know a present day Methodist who still seeks to live by this principle of Shrewsbury's and from time to time sends contributions to *Cafod*, the Catholic relief agency and to *Aid to the Church in Need*, a European Catholic agency which lives by the same rule as Shrewsbury in that it gives aid not just to Catholic churches in eastern Europe, Russia and the third world but also to Orthodox churches and this irrespective of whether Orthodox show reciprocal good will.

By the principle of disinterestedness, Shrewsbury means the Methodist determination, as first spelt out by Paul and later reinforced by Wesley, to ‘do good unto all men, especially unto those that are of the household of faith’, ‘doing good by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity doing good of every sort, and, as far as is possible, to all men’¹⁰. He means also the determination to put the objective progress of the gospel and fulfilment of the will and purpose of the Father above all sectarian interests. Speaking of the Wesleyan ideal in relationships with other churches of whatever sort and of whatever kind of relationship, favourable or otherwise, Shrewsbury says this,

‘The disinterestedness of Methodism will be its security and stability. Still seeking nothing for itself, it will pursue an even course of duty, not be roused to ill will, but calmly wait for a

⁹ Later encapsulated in the claim of British Methodism in the Deed of Union that Methodism ‘claims and cherishes its place within the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ’.

¹⁰ Paul in Galatians 6.10. Rules of the Methodist Societies.

fresh opportunity of doing good to its most jealous foes; and whatever time or in whatever place or way, such an opportunity occurs, it will gladly embrace it. Throwing open again and again the floodgates of kindness, as the most effectual means of sweeping away the almost invincible barriers of human prejudice, without upbraiding for the want of generosity, or reflecting on its opponents on account of accumulated injuries and wrongs. Disinterestedness is a great conqueror, and is destined to universal victory’.

This disinterestedness also embraces a willingness to receive from all the gifts with which the Universal Church, despite the objective sin of schism, ‘has been embellished’¹¹. Wesley himself taught that the Methodists should use all the means of grace constantly, both the instituted means, by which he meant those specifically sanctioned and commended in Scripture, and the prudential means by which he meant those developed later in the tradition of the Church but clearly compatible with scriptural principles. It was always Wesley’s intention that the Methodist people should avail themselves of the full range of the means of grace available, both those existing within the Church of England, of which he hoped the Methodists would continue loyal adherents, and those available within the Methodist societies. There is a real sense in which he was a pioneer of the concept of living in multiple traditions, a concept later pioneered within the Roman Catholic tradition at the monastery of Chevotogne and commended by the late Pope in his encyclical *Oriente Lumen* in which he called upon the Church to breathe with its two lungs, eastern and western.

One of the saddest effects of the separation of Methodism was that most Methodists soon came to rely exclusively on the means of grace within their own societies even though for a couple of generations there were those who continued to attend the parish church to receive the sacraments and there were also some chapels in which the Anglican service of Morning Prayer continued to be used until well within living memory. Wesley had intended his revival to be eucharistic as well as evangelical but both the frequency of eucharistic celebration and the fully-orbed appreciation of its significance as the highest act of Christian worship continued, until the early twentieth century, to decline on both sides of the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, traces of the original aim are still to be found in the work of Shrewsbury. To his great work, he attached an appendix extolling the virtues of the Anglican Order of Morning Prayer, regarding it as containing the finest distillation of the wisdom of the early fathers and of the Anglican reformers¹². He exhorted the Methodist people to appreciate the real virtues of both liturgical and extempore prayer and not to rely exclusively on either.

The originally inclusive liturgical and devotional spirit of Methodism has, to a considerable extent, been revived as a result of ecumenical experience and modern liturgical revision. It remains, though, for this spirit to be more fully received by all the Methodist people and for them to take every possible opportunity, consistent with faithful attendance at their own local congregations and with the due discipline both of Methodism and other churches, of experiencing the richness of the worship of all other trinitarian churches. In this respect, the suggestions of the most recent report of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, *The Grace Given You in Christ*, represent an important advance with their recommendation to both Catholics and Methodists that they explore the riches and strong points of each others’ traditions.

¹¹ *Ut Unum Sint*, para 85.

¹² *Ibid*, pp.321-343.

It is, I hope, in the spirit of William Shrewsbury that I commend the re-reception of his thought on what we have since come to call spiritual ecumenism to the rest of the Church and not just to Methodism. Elsewhere, I have explored the extraordinary resemblance between his pioneering thought and that of the better known Roman Catholic pioneer, Abbe Paul Couturier. I have also drawn attention to resemblances between Shrewsbury and the late Pope John Paul II, true pointers, I hope, to the coming, but most certainly not exclusive, convergence of the Roman Catholic and Wesleyan spiritual and theological traditions, a convergence that we both know will only attain its true fruitfulness when it assists the unity of the people of the triune God of every tradition¹³.

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¹³ For my work on Couturier and Shrewsbury, see ET April 2003, pp. Two Ecumenical Pioneers. For my work on the ecumenical thought of the late Holy Father, see *The Wisdom of John Paul II-A Summary*, Catholic Truth Society, (London), 2001, pp.101-113.