

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

John Wesley and the Methodist System

'Give heed unto reading'

JOHN WESLEY (1703–91) WAS A DON, who, in one of his sometimes contradictory statements about his life, says that he had expected to spend all his days in Oxford. That was not to be, any more than for Newman a century later, but he remained throughout the born teacher and if he had been asked, in our terms, to draw up a list of the means of spiritual direction, he would undoubtedly have included reading. He was a bookman of a book culture. True, he says in the Preface to his Standard Sermons, 'Let me be *homo unius libri*' (a man of one book), that is, the bible; but he was later to threaten to discontinue one of his preachers because the man had read nothing but the scriptures. Wesley first resolved to dedicate his whole life to God as a young Oxford man of twenty-two through reading Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and exercises of holy living and dying* from the previous century.

He was forever waxing excited about the books he had read. Sometimes neither his contemporaries nor posterity endorsed his verdict. In his Oxford days Wesley was always anxious to share his reading with the attractive young women in whose company he delighted. When, after his second conversion in May 1738, he became a revivalist preacher with converts to nurture, he desired that Methodists should be 'a reading people'. He was forever editing and abridging for their use works he deemed valuable. From 1749 to 1755 he issued *The Christian library*, extracts from a variety of authors from the Apostolic Fathers to the English Puritans. This is an amazingly catholic collection and includes many authors from whom Wesley differed in theology and churchmanship. Calvinists, Cambridge Platonists, obscure, uncanonized figures of the Catholic Reformation and some, like Molinos and Fénelon, condemned as heretics, live side by side.

Perhaps, in Puritan fashion, he identified sanctity too closely with book learning; and there are those today who would malign his Methodism as a holiness movement which ended in making its adherents middle-class. Yet there have always been enough reading Methodists to justify Wesley's faith in books as guides to godliness and it is fascinating to discover Methodist preachers after his death, broad-backed, stentorian itinerants, from cottages and coalpits, entering into an immediacy of communion with God through mental prayer as taught by some of Wesley's little-known and eccentric Counter-Reformation saints.¹ Wesley's insistence on reading increased the charity which, for him, was the essential mark of

holiness. It fostered the 'Catholic spirit', which he learned in part from William Law, who defined it as 'a communion of saints in the love of God and all goodness', acquired not from 'what is called orthodoxy in particular churches', but

by a total dying to all worldly views, by a pure love of God and by such unction from above as delivers the mind from all selfishness and makes it love truth and goodness with an equality of love in every man, whether he be Christian, Jew, or Gentile . . .²

'The inward witness'

But Wesley found Christian assurance not from books but from 'experience'. His devout life of strict rule, prayer according to the offices, sacramental observance, hard study and works of mercy had not brought him peace of mind or made him more than a rather precise and priggish clergyman, though not lacking in an articulate, diminutive charm. What appeared to him abject failure when he left Oxford for Georgia in 1735 and returned home in disgrace after some monumental tactlessness and a disastrous love affair, seems, half-unconsciously, though with the assistance of some German pietists, to have led to his 'abandonment to Divine Providence'. Within weeks of his embarrassed homecoming, London pulpits were being closed to him, for he was preaching in a different vein from that of sober Tillotsonian morality. The climax was on May 24 1738, when after various signs of hope through *sortes biblicae* and the words of the anthem, Psalm 130, at St Paul's Evensong, Wesley went 'very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans'. His Journal goes on:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

The immediate consequence was that he began to pray fervently for those who had ill-used him. In the next days he was not free from the superiority of the convert, but Aldersgate Street brought him to share in the incipient revival which had begun under a young preacher whom he had influenced in Oxford, George Whitefield, and within a year had made him an open-air preacher too, the instrument of frenetic scenes, alarming to those afraid of the excitement and the noise, but resulting in

many genuine conversions. Later in his long life, Wesley modified some of his earlier claims and more extreme statements. Within a few years he was telling the first Methodist Conference that although he and his brother Charles, whose experience was remarkably parallel, had discovered that holiness comes by faith and we are justified before we are sanctified, holiness had been their point from Oxford onwards, and their vocation, not chosen, but thrust upon them, was to raise a holy people. Rules were not abandoned. The 'holy people' were called, like the previous group around the Wesleys in Oxford, *Methodists*. The antinomianism ('let us continue in sin that grace may abound'), which had bedevilled much post-Reformation experiential Christianity was anathema. Yet experience was henceforth vital for Wesley. One could not find faith or assurance by intellectual assent to propositions, by the lure of the beauty of holiness, nor by acceptance of the authority of the Church and the holy tradition; there must be the 'inward witness', the conviction which, following Romans 8,16, Wesley regarded as the Holy Spirit's acquiescence with our own spirit that we were children of God. There must be personal conviction, self-realized, felt.³

Wesley was in organization and to some extent in theology a pragmatist, his mind always open to evidences of the life of God in the soul and in the world and to what advanced love of God and neighbour. This sometimes brought him to the verge of superstition, though he was almost always held back by his innate rationalism. He was an enthusiast who distrusted enthusiasm, a fideist who deemed work essential. The Divine Law, which could not make sinners right with God, but only expose their dire estrangement from goodness, was always to be preached to the converted as the loving response to the saving, free, prevenient love of God in Christ. But Christians were to be guided by the things which happened to them in which they were to see not chance but Providence. Wesley would have agreed with the Reformed tradition that sanctification is attained by the divine discipline imposed by the duties and experiences of life rather than through the regulations of a spiritual director. But his doctrine, as George Croft Cell put it, was 'the necessary synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace and the Catholic ethic of holiness'.⁴ This was possible by the mediation of experience bringing inner certainty. To his distinctive means of spiritual guidance we must now turn.

'Be ye perfect'

Because holiness was Wesley's aim, those influenced by the preaching must not be left to live forever with the story of a dramatic conversion and nothing more. Indeed if their religious experience was contained simply in the initial act of faith, though it was radical in that it meant both a renunciation of sin and a turning to God, they would lapse, if not into their former ways, into complacency and 'Pharisaism', and even be

in danger of becoming antinomians. Thus the grace of God would be made void. He did not give his Son simply that we might be accepted, sinners as we are, rather that we might be partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1, 4, words on which Wesley opened his New Testament at five o'clock on the morning of May 24th 1738) and perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5,48). The Lutheran 'always a sinner, always penitent, always justified' is an inadequate description of the Christian life. It limits the work of grace. The purpose of God's love in Christ is defeated if a spot of sin remains even while we are still in this world. Some lines of Charles Wesley, whose hymns so marvellously encapsulate his brother's teaching, express it:

Except thou purge my every stain
Thy suffering and my faith are vain.

This did lead to some exaggeration and dangers. Wesley safeguarded the doctrine by defining Perfection as Perfect Love, the keeping of the two great commandments, not as freedom from all error or involuntary sin. The test was always fidelity to the mind of Christ, love of enemies, a heart purged of 'self and pride', malice and all uncharitableness. There are some remarkable affinities with the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church and these are not fortuitous but the result of Wesley's reading in the Fathers. He included in the *Christian library* the *Homilies* of 'Macarius the Egyptian', who was in fact a Syrian monk, his teachings virtually those of the fourth-century Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nyssa.

Now Gregory taught no static perfectionism. Perfection was indeed in the very desire for holiness and the longing for attainment beyond what was already achieved. 'This truly is the vision of God, never to be satisfied in the desire to see him.'⁵ And Macarius wrote, 'It is only gradually that a man grows and comes to a *perfect man, to the measure of the stature*, not, as some would say, "Off with one coat and on with another"'.⁶

Unfortunately, Wesley departed somewhat from this wisdom when he came to teach that at the end of the process, entry into perfection might be instantaneous, 'in a moment', like first conversion. This not only aroused opposition; it led to some scandals within the Methodist Societies, extreme claims and fanatical scenes; and it sowed the seeds of some of the unhealthier and more nauseating aspects of later revivalism.⁷

And his insistence on a quasi-scientific investigation or survey of claimants compounded the error. But he himself testified with the apostle 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after . . .' (Phil 3,12), very much in the Cappadocian spirit. And the kernel of truth in Wesley's doctrine is contained in a comparison A. M. Allchin has made with the Byzantine saint of the eleventh century, Symeon the New Theologian. 'He too taught with a similar emphasis that Christians in every age are to expect to know and to feel all that the first Christians knew and felt, that there is no diminution in the action of the Spirit throughout the ages.'⁸

Societies, bands, classes

The means Wesley devised for monitoring and assisting growth in holiness was the group. He gathered his converts into societies in each place—and his preaching was throughout Great Britain and Ireland, though he had most success in the London-Bristol-Newcastle ‘triangle’ and in Cornwall. But these he began to divide into ‘bands’ as early as the end of 1738 and, later, into ‘classes’. Religious societies, groups of serious Christians meeting together for the deepening of spiritual life and experience, had been a feature of English and European Christianity for some time. The Wesleys in Oxford had formed, with one or two others, the ‘Holy Club’ of the first ‘Methodists’, though recent scholarship has established that this was by no means as tightly-knit as nineteenth-century Wesleyan mythology had led us to suppose. In Germany, there were *Collegia pietatis*. M. de Renty, one of Wesley’s heroes in mid-seventeenth century Paris, founded a society of ladies for what was virtually the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and collected around him groups which some have regarded as the Wesleyan precursors. Whatever the decisive influences, for Wesley, discipline and direction were matters for a small body of Methodists, gathered from the whole local membership, sexually segregated, meeting regularly and rigorous in mutual examination, testimony and confession. On December 25 1738 he drew up ‘Rules of the Band Societies’ for the Society in London. There was no credal or denominational test, but a ticket of Society membership must be shown to gain admittance. Otherwise the one qualification was desire for holiness.

The Rules begin by stating: ‘The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed”’. The meetings must be at least weekly, must begin punctually with singing or prayer, followed by an orderly progress around the company in which individuals tell of the true state of their souls, the faults committed ‘in thought, word or deed’ since the last meeting and the temptations felt. Each confession is open for comment by the group and cases of conscience are discussed and guidance given. The following are some of the questions asked:

Have you the forgiveness of your sins?

Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?

Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?

Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?

Do you desire to be told of your faults?

Do you desire to be told of all your faults and that plain and home?

Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?

Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise and without reserve?⁹

The bands were for the especially dedicated members, but when a financial levy became necessary, a Methodist in Bristol thought that this was best collected by a weekly meeting of the Society divided into groups for convenience. Wesley agreed and saw the spiritual possibilities. So every member was henceforth under obligation to meet in class, twelve being the maximum number in each. The principle was the same as that of the bands and the discipline only a little less rigid.

On December 25 1744, Wesley supplemented the 1738 Rules with a series of 'Directions Given to the Band Societies'. These are a more exacting version of 'The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle upon Tyne etc.' of May 1 1743. Members are to abstain from doing evil and 'zealously to maintain good works'. Under the former they must not buy or sell anything on the Lord's Day, taste no spirituous liquor, unless prescribed by a physician, pawn nothing, 'no, not to save a life', not mention anyone's fault behind his back and 'stop short those who do', wear no needless ornaments, 'such as rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, ruffles', use no needless self-indulgence like snuff or tobacco. Good works include almsgiving, rebuke of sin, frugality. Thirdly there must be constant attendance upon what Wesley called 'the ordinances of God'. These included five particular duties:

1. To be at church and at the Lord's table every week, and at every public meeting of the Bands.

This meant attendance at the parish church and the Anglican Holy Communion. It was always Wesley's hope that Methodism might remain within the Church of England, its own services, largely evangelistic and for the edification and direction of the Societies, being additional to the statutory Prayer Book rites to which Methodists should conform. That this was not ultimately the case was due in part to Anglican suspicions and inhospitality, in part to the strength and vigour of Methodism as a distinct organization, different in ethos. Weekly communion was not habitual in the English Church of the eighteenth century. Wesley's insistence is evidence both of his belief in the centrality of the Eucharist and of Methodism being in some sense a sacramental revival, though we must not imagine that all the Methodists who at times thronged Anglican altars and sang the Wesley Hymns on the Lord's Supper shared—or understood—their high doctrine.

2. To attend the ministry of the word every morning, unless distance, business, or sickness prevent.

This refers to the preaching at 5 a.m. This became an unrealistic demand, though Wesley said that its cessation would mean the end of Methodism. What we should note is that *preaching* was one of Wesley's means of spiritual direction as in the Anglican and Puritan tradition of the seventeenth century.¹⁰

3. To use private prayer every day; and family prayer, if you are head of a family.

Wesley's first publication in 1733, while at Oxford, was *A collection of forms of prayer for every day in the week*, for the use of his pupils, many times re-issued for Methodists, drawn mostly from Non-Juring sources. In 1745, he issued *A collection of prayers for families*, much re-printed; and in 1772 *Prayers for children*.

4. To read the Scriptures and meditate therein, at every vacant hour.

5. To observe, as days of fasting or abstinence, all Fridays in the year. Wesley saw fasting as an act of love for God. He made short shrift of the argument that it is better to abstain from 'pride and vanity, from foolish and hurtful desires, from peevishness and anger, and discontent than from food'. 'Without question it is'; but abstinence from food is a means to the greater end.

We refrain from the one, that, being endued with power from on high, we may be able to refrain from the other . . . For if we ought to abstain from evil tempers and desires, then we ought to abstain from food; since these little instances of self-denial are the ways God hath chose, wherein to bestow that great salvation.¹¹

Evaluations

There were those who saw in Wesley's Methodism covert Popery and the Roman Catholic confessional closeted in the class-meeting. If so, they were likely to be disabused by Bishop Challoner's vehement *A caveat against the Methodists* (1760) in which the Methodist preachers and leaders are castigated as 'ministers of Satan', 'false prophets', 'wolves in sheep's cloathing'. This roused Wesley's Protestant ire and he replied in terms very different from those of his remarkably eirenical 'Letter to a Roman Catholic' written at Dublin in 1749.¹²

The strictness of Wesley's Rules is understood if we remember that he was not founding a Church but an Order of Societies bound to him and to each other in a nation-wide 'connexion', but not in rivalry with the established Church. He contemplated, though did not introduce, a distinctive dress for Methodists and the 'communism' of the primitive Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles. He was concerned with an *elite corps* particularly in the Rules for the Bands. This presupposed

the Church, with its liturgy and sacraments, the hinterland of the pilgrims' progress to perfection. As Methodism became separated from the Church of England after Wesley's death and in the course of the nineteenth century evolved into a world Church, numerically larger than what became the Anglican Communion, the Rules were less observed, though to this day every Methodist member is under the pastoral care of a 'Classleader'.

In a sermon preached in 1899, James Hope Moulton, philologist, New Testament scholar and future authority on Zoroastrianism, took as his theme the foot-washing in John 13, which he called 'A Neglected Sacrament'. He saw its purpose as 'the duty of fellowship among believers for the conquest of daily sin'. The class-meeting is its modern equivalent. But he recognizes that there are those who find it difficult to unburden themselves in a group and need a 'soul friend', or at most an intimate company of two or three.¹³ Since Moulton's time, classes, where they still meet, are most likely to be House Groups. Support Groups are increasing, though Wesley's interrogations are discarded.

The revolutionary aspect of Wesley's system of spiritual direction is not only that it is 'societary', a matter of fellowship, but that it is lay. Christians of suitable gifts, graces and dedication, but otherwise ordinary people of no particular education or social cachet, have the power to be spiritual guides and to exercise the priestly office of the remission and retention of sins. Of course, Wesley expected that they would learn from reading and experience but, in principle, the Methodist laity are not only to be consulted in matters of doctrine, they are to be pastors of the flock. The minister, itinerant, is the *pastor pastorum*, responsible for their training in priesthood. Of course, it does not often work out like that today. Human nature is inveterately hierarchical and a large Church will require a clerical caste for purposes of order and administration. Wesley himself may be described as a moderate episcopalian. But he trusted the laity as spiritual guides and there are those in all our denominations now who, whether they are aware of him or not, feel that something like his system may be needed for the twenty-first century.

This system, however, demanded a central authority. While he lived this was Wesley himself in the Chair of an annual Conference of his travelling preachers. In his later years, he was nicknamed 'Pope John'. He often encountered opposition. There were difficulties between those preachers who were ordained clergymen and those who were not, while some Societies sought independence from the 'Connexion', which Wesley, who was no Congregationalist, much less nonconformist, resisted strongly. When Conference became 'the living Wesley' after his death, its autocracy helped to cause many nineteenth-century divisions, grievously bitter in communities which preached perfect love. They are now mostly healed, through democratization, though Conference is still supreme, the heart of *episcopate*.

There is no doubt that the system was too severe, too intense. And it confined people's lives too much to a narrow and perhaps self-absorbed piety, even though there were fruits of social good. Some think that subsequent Methodism has become too activist, lacking the contemplative element in spirituality, ignoring Wesley's questions.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the class-meeting could be culturally deficient and that as Methodism became a Church there was demand for concerts too. Wesley himself as a young man at Oxford combined a liberal social life with his strict Anglican rule, though he may always have been preternaturally serious, hence the nickname given by some of his lady friends, 'Little Primitive Christianity'. Yet he possessed a copy of Shakespeare, which he had copiously annotated. One of his preachers destroyed it after his death. Martin Thornton's is an intriguing suggestion: 'The Methodist class meeting, in part reviving the English empirical tradition, would have been still more creative had Parson Woodforde presided'.¹⁴ (The clericalism is a serious misunderstanding. The parson should not preside.)

Criticisms may stand. Yet one cannot endorse the conclusions of an undergraduate essay of a few years ago clearly influenced by E. P. Thompson that Methodist doctrines 'perverted all that was healthy in men's emotions, its creed was cruel and grim, its view of life bleak and joyless'.¹⁵ Wesley's slogan was 'Holiness is happiness', a contrast to that which the young Newman derived from a Calvinist, 'Holiness rather than peace'. And at the heart of spiritual direction was fellowship, rather in the sense of the Prayer Book Marriage Service, 'the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity'. This did happen and there was joy, in sins forgiven and in the friendship of Christ mediated by his people. This expressed itself, naturally, in the singing of hymns and although they had often to be tediously lined out, and John Wesley saw singing as a spiritual discipline,¹⁶ they could take wing and become 'a rapture of praise'. They were also used as prayers in class and in private. One of them, abbreviated these days, and not understood in its proper context, is specifically for the class-meeting:

Try us, O God, and search the ground
 Of every sinful heart:
 Whate'er of sin in us is found,
 O bid it all depart!

When to the right or left we stray,
 Leave us not comfortless!
 But guide our feet into the way
 Of everlasting peace.

Help us to help each other, Lord,
 Each other's cross to bear
 Let each his friendly aid afford,
 And feel his brother's care.

Help us to build each other up,
 Our little stock improve;
 Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
 And perfect us in love.

Up into thee our living Head,
 Let us in all things grow,
 Till thou hast made us free indeed,
 And spotless here below.

Then, when the mighty work is wrought,
 Receive thy ready Bride;
 Give us in heav'n a happy lot
 With all the sanctified.

Gordon S. Wakefield

NOTES

¹ See e.g. Coley, Samuel: *Thomas Collins*, abridged edition (Kelly, London, 1896), pp 184ff.

² Moreton, G. (ed): *Works of William Law* (London, 1893), p 183f.

³ In the last sentence of his book *Philosophy and the meaning of life*, the late Karl Britton says that a believer 'cannot suppose that in the eyes of God there is a fundamental difference . . . between those who seek God's forgiveness and those who somehow learn to forgive themselves as well as to forgive others' (p 215). I would want to maintain that although the Christian must believe that forgiveness comes from God and has divine objectivity, unless a person can convince him- or herself, it is null and void. In Iris Murdoch's novel *Henry and Cato* (Chatto and Windus, 1976), Cato, an atheist, enters into an amazing experience of the Holy Trinity described with a brilliance theologians might envy; but after some years as a priest and work in derelict areas of London, he loses it. He will not emerge from the dark night of doubt, unless the Trinity becomes again something he *feels* and *knows*.

⁴ Cell, George Croft: *John Wesley's theology* (Abingdon, Cokesbury, 1950), p 361f.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa: *Life of Moses* (Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press and SPCK, 1978), p 116.

⁶ Macarius: *Homilies*, ed Mason, A.J. (London, 1921) 15, 51.

⁷ See Wakefield, Gordon S.: *Robert Newton Flew* (Epworth Press, 1971), pp 36ff.

⁸ Allchin, A. M.: *A taste of liberty* (Sisters of the Love of God, Oxford, 1982), p 32. The title itself is taken from one of Charles Wesley's hymns on perfection.

⁹ Jackson, T. (ed): *The works of John Wesley* (London, 1831 and after), VIII pp 272-3.

¹⁰ Cf McAdoo, H. R.: *The structure of Caroline moral theology* (Longmans, 1949), *passim*.

¹¹ *Works VIII* pp 273-4. On fasting see Wesley, John: *Standard sermons*, ed E. H. Sugden (London, 1931), I pp 451f, and *Works XI* p 439.

¹² See Gilley, Sheridan: 'Challoner as controversialist' in Duffy, Eamon (ed): *Challoner and his Church* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), pp 107-110.

¹³ Moulton, J. H.: *A neglected sacrament* (Epworth Press, 1919), p 96.

¹⁴ Thornton, Martin: *English spirituality* (SPCK, 1963), p 285.

¹⁵ Cited by Dr Clyde Binfield of Sheffield University in a paper to the Ecclesiastical History Society.

¹⁶ He devised rules for singing, e.g. 'Sing exactly'; 'Sing all'; 'Sing lustily'; 'Sing modestly' ('Do not bawl'); 'Sing in time'; 'Sing spiritually'.