



Holiness in the Methodist tradition – an ecumenical pilgrimage

Tim Macquiban

THE REVD DR TIM MACQUIBAN is currently Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, and minister of the Ponte Sant' Angelo Church as mission partner of The Methodist Church in Britain.

tmacquiban@gmail.com
Rome, Italy

In this paper I seek to argue that all of us are called to be saints, to live the holy life, and that Methodists are called to be a consecrated people, through our Baptism and response to God's call to costly discipleship. We do this in the company of other Christians whose spirituality may be expressed in different ways but whose emphasis on holiness enables this vital aspect of Christian experience to be a tool for ecumenical spirituality which draws us into that greater unity to which Christ calls us. I write as Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, building on a range of previous experiences of working alongside Christians of other traditions.

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Holiness and saintliness

If we were to ask people what is the essence of Methodist theology and spirituality shaped by the brothers John and Charles Wesley, then *holiness* might be one key word that recurs again and again. It may be that holiness is out of fashion, though I suspect that the current interest in Methodist spirituality indicates that this is not so. It is certainly a theme we ought to be thinking about, especially as it features so much in the ecumenical dialogues that many of us are engaged with, particularly with the Roman Catholic Church.

‘How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.’ So writes C. S. Lewis in his *Letters to an American Lady*, reminding us all of the importance of the holy life which leads us to God. For John Wesley, the quest for scriptural holiness was central to his platform for the revival of religion within the Church of England in his day in the eighteenth century. He told his followers that they ought to think about heaven and hell daily. Perhaps we ought to think rather more of heaven and rather less of hell than some Methodist preachers have in the past! We should always in our worship give thanks for those saints who worship with us in the nearer presence of God and try to follow their example as heroes/heroines of faith in their striving for holiness and Christian perfection

You may have heard people say from time to time, ‘Oh, so-and-so is a real saint.’ I’ve heard it said of older respected members of congregations who have made an enormous impact on individual lives. There are some who are perhaps readily identifiable as such saints, as God’s holy people, not just the stained-glass window types of ecclesiastical-establishment figures from our glorious Christian past who adorn basilicas and cathedrals and churches with a special place in the different church calendars and their names on the door and above the altar. But we must also remember the towering figures of the last one hundred years, a century of martyrdoms, of those mown down at altars, like Oscar Romero just 35 years ago in San Salvador, or sacrificed for the causes of justice and peace, like Martin Luther King who has been remembered in the fiftieth anniversary of Selma recently. Or figures from our own Methodist tradition, prophetic witnesses rather than blood-martyrs, like Donald Soper, William Sangster and Leslie Weatherhead, whose costly ministries have shaped a whole generation of personal and social holiness among Methodists since the Second World War.

Often these people are not cardboard cut-outs of the moral giants that hagiographers like to create, but ordinary people caught up, sometimes reluctantly, in God's extraordinary work. George Orwell once wrote that 'All saints should be judged guilty until proved innocent'. Perhaps that applies to us all and encourages us to strive to be holy people. Perhaps the only thing that marks out the saints is the peculiar sense of going somewhere and trying to live a life as if they believed that to be so. Bonhoeffer reminded us that to be a Christian is not to deny the world or to try to be super-religious in some way but to be fully human as Jesus was, 'taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and its helplessness'. Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican spiritual writer, once wrote that 'in our expression of religion and in the worship which is the expression of our religion, we look towards eternity; and bit by bit, in various ways and degrees, we discover in ourselves a certain capacity for eternity'.

Sometimes, as we reflect on the state of holiness in our Methodist tradition today, we detect a disconnectedness between our worship services and our theology, between our worship also and our mission as the (holy) people of God. But every time we celebrate Holy Communion together, we remember in the great prayer of thanksgiving that we are surrounded by 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven' in that 'unseen cloud of witnesses' who encompass us, enfolding us in the state of blessedness which Jesus promised to those who are faithful disciples to the end.

True worship is that which bids us join Christ's passage from death to life, from time to eternity, beginning on earth and ending in heaven, as Charles Wesley often wrote in his hymns, centred on 'pardon, and holiness and heaven'. Our worship, in our often feeble way, strives to join with that of the saints gathered round the throne of God, so that we can sing with them, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts'. Holiness is our quest, the quest of developing that certain capacity for eternity, a feast to which all God's people are to be invited and included around the table.

John Wesley reminded the people called Methodist that they could not be solitary Christians. The quest for holiness is a false quest if it only consists of personal salvation. By contrast, social holiness seeks to express love of God in love of neighbour. Fellowship is a very Methodist word and a very Methodist emphasis. It shouldn't be a holy huddle on earth alone, locked in our church buildings and remote from the community in which it is set, but a fellowship which gives thanks for those who have gone before who are our examples in

the faith and prayer in which we are invited to participate, to follow them and share in God's heavenly kingdom, serving the needs of neighbours 'nearby and far away'.

Methodists have sometimes in their perverse nonconformist revulsion of the commemoration of saints not been as heavenly minded as our spiritual forebears in faith. Perhaps we should remember C. S. Lewis' *Letter to Malcolm* which posed the question, 'What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?' Those who have lost loved ones will want, as the number of funerals we have in our churches given our Methodist demographics increases, to affirm that they worship in the presence of a greater company. They will want to 'sing with those to glory gone,/ For all the servants of our King in earth and heaven are one', as Charles Wesley wrote.

When I was much younger, I loved those puzzle books where you had to join up the dots. To start with a mass of dots and very little idea of what you might end up with. Gradually the picture unfolds – is it a kangaroo or a hippopotamus? And then the final picture is revealed. 'What we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is,' as John the Evangelist writes.

God calls us to that holy life which was revealed to us in Christ. We are all called to be saints, to be blessed, as those who trust God, through poverty and persecution, through sorrow and warfare. The peaceful and the pure will see God. Paul followed Christ in his striving towards perfection. He urged Christians to do the same. Their lives, lived in Christ, will be taken up to God and transfigured beyond our wildest imagination and intensified within the community and fellowship of perfect divine love as part of the new creation. And our worship gets caught up with their worship so that sometimes we catch glimpses of the glory of God in the thinness of the tissue between heaven and earth.

Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

My context: ecumenical work in the past

My whole ministry has been shaped by the ecumenical encounters I have been privileged to share as I have built on the heritage of the Church of England

which nurtured me in my youth as a result of having been brought up in an Anglican clerical home. It was in Cambridge that I made the transition to Methodism, albeit along the way worshipping in the Anglican Franciscan tradition at St Benet's and formal Anglican college chapel worship, as well as singing with an evangelical Christian choir who practised at Ridley Hall.

After engaging in local church ministry in Halifax and being involved in ecumenical work in West Yorkshire, teaching church history at Wesley College, Bristol, enabled me to make good use of the tools that my studies in Methodist history had taught me, that to be a good ecumenist one needed to be rooted in a thorough knowledge and love of one's own tradition in order to appreciate the differences with other traditions, and to be able to share one's own charisms as well as to discover that often we talk the same language but with different accents and nuances. This is particularly so with the centrality of holiness within our theology and spirituality.

I discovered this most working within the context of Westminster College, Oxford, where I set up the Wesley and Methodist Studies Centre, seeing that talking about our beliefs ecumenically with students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels opened up new possibilities for the enrichment of our Christian growth. I discovered there the importance of our links with the wider Methodist family, particularly churches from the American tradition, as well as participating in an important conference sponsored by the World Methodist Historical Society on 'Sanctification in the Benedictine and Methodist traditions', held near Rome in 1994. The vital link between our worship and our mission was formed in our understanding of each other, as we explored aspects of *lex orandi, lex credendi* in the vital interplay between our worship and prayer and the expression of our holiness in social witness and evangelism.

For six years I served as Principal at Sarum College, a former Anglican theological college at Salisbury, now an ecumenical education and conference centre serving a wide variety of church and community needs. This experience put me in touch with a broad range of church leaders, including Archbishop Rowan Williams, one of our Fellows and Sarum Lecturer in 2003, who attracted 700 people a night for four nights listening to lectures on the significance of church history! The late Cambridge Professors of Church History, Herbert Butterfield and Gordon Rupp, would be smiling at such a thought.

Working with a range of other Christians helps one to define one's own identity, as we found when we brought together Christians of different traditions – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox – to talk about holiness and

other aspects of our spirituality. These fed through to programmes of catechesis for pre-ordination theological students as well as lay people on Christian education programmes at Sarum and Oxford.

When I moved to Cambridge I imagined that I was starting on the last chapter of my story. I was glad to be back in circuit ministry at the heart of that ancient university and city, and involved in the life of Wesley House within the Cambridge Federation. This was somewhere where ecumenical links could be forged and my maturing Methodism could be related to the challenges 'to serve the present age'. I remained a committed ecumenist in a more difficult ecumenical climate but a more mature Methodist eager to continue to wrestle with these tensions, to tell the story of 'what wonder God hath wrought' by raising up Methodism, not just to serve society but to point people to the living God who is greater than the Churches we all belong to.

Present context

But then I was unexpectedly transferred to my present role as Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, representing British, European and World Methodism in our relations, formal and informal, with Christians of a variety of ecclesial traditions, predominantly Roman Catholic in this centre of the Roman Catholic world. Rooted in local church ministry as pastor of the Ponte Sant'Angelo English-speaking Methodist Church has earthed what could be a lonely ecumenical existence as a single presence in a sea of Catholic strength in an Italy still deeply culturally Catholic.

My reflections on the first Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU) I attended in Rome have been posted up on the ecumenical pages of the Methodist Church website. So here I want only to reflect on that aspect relating to our theme of holiness, particularly relating to the Ecumenical Colloquium for the Year of Consecrated Life, organised by three sections of the Vatican administration to take account of the Pope's renewed commitment to ecumenism in the light of the celebration of 50 years since the closing of the Second Vatican Council. The four-day meeting came in the context of both this WPCU and the Year of Consecrated Life 2014–2016. Participants concluded each day with Vespers in the Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic traditions, and ended with the Papal Vespers presided over by Pope Francis in the Basilica of St Paul's without the Walls on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. Through contact with the Master General of the Croziers (a religious order founded in

the Middle Ages), over conversation about Albert Outler and his contribution to this Council, I was invited to participate as one of only two Methodists in a gathering of over one hundred religious women and men from around the world, from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions, to explore the implications of what it was to live the consecrated life and how this could contribute to ecumenical dialogue.

One particular evening during the week, I was invited to address students and staff of the Venerable English College on the topic of 'Holiness and heaven: the Methodist contribution to ecumenical dialogue'. I drew on the ecumenical experiences I have had during my life, and opened up a conversation on the nature of shared and common purpose of Catholics and Methodists in their pursuit of holiness as expressed in the formal dialogues, but also in our worshipping and working together practically, as an expression of our visible unity. I started by asking what a Methodist like myself was doing attending a conference for the religious. I answered my own question by making the claim that Methodism could be best understood, *pace* Herbert Workman and Rupert Davies, two of our Methodist historians of the past century, as a quasi-religious order, in a similar relationship to the Church of England, out of which the movement emerged, as the Franciscans and Dominicans emerged from medieval Catholicism as movements of renewal centred on community life, teaching and preaching, and outreach to the unchurched and poor.

The contributions of various speakers to the colloquium underlined the importance for Roman Catholics of listening to and understanding the contribution of others to consecrated life in a spirit of receptive ecumenism. The desire to celebrate ecumenical spirituality where community life spanned ecclesial borders, as with communities at Taizé and Bose, Bari and Iona, should be beacons of hope for all Christians in the quest for unity as we engage together in the conversion of the hearts of all in the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*, taking up the challenges of Pope Francis.

The vital role that men and women religious of different Christian Churches play in the ecumenical journey was at the heart of Pope Francis' meeting on the Saturday of the WPCU with us in the search for Christian unity. In this meeting, the Pope recalled the words of the Second Vatican Council document *Unitatis Redintegratio*, stressing that *spiritual ecumenism* is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. Consecrated people like yourselves, he said, therefore have a particular vocation in this work of promoting unity. The Pope also mentioned ecumenical communities like Taizé and Bose, which have taken up

this vocation and are privileged places of encounter between Christians of different denominations. The Pope spoke of three conditions at the core of the search for Christian unity. First, there is no unity without *conversion of heart*, which includes forgiving and asking for forgiveness. Second, he said there is no unity without *prayer*, and therefore men and women religious who pray for unity are like 'an invisible monastery' bringing together Christians of different denominations from different countries around the world. Third, the Pope said that there is no unity without *holiness of daily life*. So the more we put our search for unity into practice in our relations with others, the more we will be modelling our lives on the message of the gospel.

The rest of the conference was a rich meeting of women and men from very different orders and institutions, some ecumenical, some rooted in one particular ecclesial tradition. Some were ancient (Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, the Croziers) and others were communities with particular charisms to share, some with missionary orientation in different parts of the world. We learnt to listen to the testimonies of the various contributions and see the common threads of people dedicating themselves, as lay or ordained persons, to the consecrated life of holiness, prayer, worship and service, with vows or rules for the disciplined life. I was able to share my understanding of the whole people called Methodist being a religious order, originally as a movement for renewal within the wider Church, 'to spread scriptural holiness through the land' in small groups of women and men bound by mutual accountability for the development of their spiritual life and the expression of it in social holiness.

Cardinal Koch, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, gave an address on 'The importance of ecumenism in the Year of Consecrated Life', quoting from the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who highlights the rediscovery for Protestants of the value of a life of communion, united by prayer and work. Our common roots, in our shared Baptism, and in our use of the traditions of the early Church, should enable us to walk together in the apostolic life and mission of the Church. He reminded us of the example and witness of Fr Paul Couturier, the passionate pioneer of spiritual ecumenism, creating what he called 'an invisible monastery' in the world into which all churches might come together in unity.

In an honest analysis by the prefect of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, we were reminded of the dangers to those who were called to consecrated life which was a gift of God. There was the danger of the weakness of formation,

of teaching in what it means to live the life of holiness, as well as the danger of anxiety over achieving targets rather than concentrating on the quality of the spiritual life. And there was the danger of failing to address inter-generational and cultural issues in a world which barely recognises the value of cloistered or open community life as opposed to the self-centred and hedonistic nature of many individualistic approaches to well-being in a world in search of pleasure, possessions and dominion over others. There was also the danger of failing to connect our worship with our mission, to be witnesses to the joy of the gospel and to awaken the world in converting hearts and minds to Christ. Mission and discipleship belong together in an apostolic life of holiness.

All told, this was an incredibly rich octave of Christian unity in Rome, which opens up for the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, many more opportunities for connections with other traditions, as well as offering to others the chance (sometimes for the first time) to reach a deeper understanding of the particular charisms of Methodism and its place in the wider Church.

Perhaps that is a good point to finish and for us to reflect. If we are called, through our common Baptism, to be holy people, is there any sense in which Methodism does bear the marks of being a religious order of consecrated persons, as some church historians in the past have asked?

- Do the questions we are asked at our confirmation have a bearing on our making a commitment to Christ? And what importance do we put on catechesis and proper preparation and follow-up for confirmation?
- What are the vows we make and what are the marks of faithful discipleship? Do we remember this when we give out our tickets of membership – how sacrificial is our life as a Methodist Christian meant to be?
- What sort of an order are we, and what particular charisms do we have to share? Do they include preaching and teaching, serving and healing in our social witness, praying and worshipping?
- How do we express our community life together in a way which is faithful to the origins of Methodism with its small groups for fellowship of mutual accountability and discipline, as schools for saints as well as sinners?

For, saints we are called to be, as the people called Methodists in the twenty-first century, in an ecumenical pilgrimage with others sharing this quest for holiness, as those that John and Charles Wesley inspire today 'to serve the present age'.

