



A survey of Methodists exploring interreligious relations

John Wesley

Having considered the views of nine Methodist scholars on John Wesley and interreligious relationships, I suggest John Wesley would encourage us:

- to see that God is not only the God of Christians, but also of people of other religions;
- to acknowledge that God's grace is universal in scope and may be found at work in other religions;
- to affirm pluralism – to be open not only to the diversity within the Christian tradition, but also to acknowledge that God is at work in other religions;
- to express our faith in a liberating and accommodating way that shows an openness to people of other religions without any expectation that they should join us or we them;
- to demonstrate acceptance and conviction – to be accepting of other people's religious convictions while remaining committed to our own Christian faith;
- to see that the fruits of the Spirit are not confined to Christians, but are also exemplified by many people belonging to other religions, and that this is the work of God's grace;
- to hold to the view that how people live out their spiritual journey is more important than what they believe;
- to see interreligious dialogue as not only a way of gaining a better understanding of other people's religion, but as a way to gain a better understanding of our own faith, and so of becoming better Christians;
- not to promote Christianity by putting down other people's religious traditions;
- not to pass judgement on the ultimate fate of people of other religions.

20th century scholars

What can we learn from those 20th century evangelists, missionaries, preachers and scholars in the Wesleyan tradition who have explored the interreligious scene? Having looked at five of them in some depth (James Hope Moulton, E Stanley Jones, D T Niles, Geoffrey Parrinder, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith) I suggest they would encourage us to:

- see the hand of God at work in other religions and so affirm their positive values;
- show respect for all other religions – our task as Christians is not to destroy them but to acquire a sympathetic understanding of other people's beliefs and to build on this as we relate to them;
- recognise that God will act lovingly and justly towards people of other religions according to the way they relate to other people;
- see dialogue as an encounter between people that embraces a broad vision of justice, rather than something narrow and parochial;

- take the language of 'grace' more seriously so that we listen to each other with reverence, respect and humility;
- focus on what religion means to us as experience, without argument, making a case, or talking in an abstract way;
- embrace a new understanding of mission as participation in the life and history of another community that enables us to see God has been at work there long before we arrived and still is;
- a conviction that while God has something special to offer all people in Jesus Christ, God is also present outside Christianity in other religions;
- be willing to learn from other faiths and not in an abstract way but through an encounter between persons in a spirit of grace and with love;
- take the Christian doctrine of grace seriously so that we move away from an exclusivist Christian stance towards one that is more inclusive.

21st century developments

As we engage in interreligious dialogue in the 21st century what can we learn from those who have a strong Wesleyan background and are still active in exploring the interreligious scene? Having considered the views of four Methodist scholars at some depth (John Cobb, Kenneth Cracknell, Wesley Ariarajah, and Diana Eck) I suggest they would encourage us to:

- a pastoral approach to communicating interreligious concerns to members of the Christian church, including meeting people where they are, engaging with their prejudices and stereotypes, and moving to a critique of inherited attitudes that prevent Christians from relating more positively with people of different religious traditions;
- a reconsideration of the position of biblical writers including an alternative inclusive salvation history and an inclusive Christology that will lead to a new openness and generosity towards those of other religions;
- recognise that interreligious dialogue is not a theoretical matter that begins with religious systems, but is a practical matter that begins with people meeting each other at the level of friendship that will lead to common action and the addressing of injustice;
- recognise that dialogue is also a challenging encounter requiring serious study, analysis, discernment, the capacity to get to the heart of the matters that divide people, and encouragement of self-criticism as well as criticism of each other;
- embrace a Christology of creative transformation that opens us to God's gift of new possibility in our relationships with people of other religions, paving the way for mutual challenge of the dialogue partners and enabling them to enrich their lives and clarify their faith as they learn from each other;
- rescuing the word mission from its long association with imperialism and colonialism such that we no longer think in terms of the missionaries and the missionised, so we can stand alongside people of other religious traditions who have their own understanding of mission, in such a way that we can all witness to our own religions and traditions;
- recognise that sexism is present in all religions and make sure that interreligious dialogue is not a male domain – women's perspectives must be heard and allowed to make a difference in the dialogue process;
- develop a spirituality capable of enabling us to participate at depth in the new religiously plural context in which we live.

Prepared by Rev John Roberts