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University Sermon for the Tercentenary of the Birth of John Wesley*

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John Wesley was an irresponsible Fellow at Lincoln College. Most of the time he was an absent drain on college resources, drawing his stipend while on a mission to Georgia or treating the world as his parish. In today's QAA-driven world he would not only be found guilty of neglecting his students, but despite a massive publication record, he would hardly have satisfied the RAE either, given his cavalier approach to scholarship. But then he did live through the eighteenth century not the twenty-first!

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Wesley was a bag of contradictions. In some respects he was an eighteenth-century rationalist, yet he anticipated the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, appealing to the heart, not just the head. He was profoundly self-absorbed, yet revealed his inner life not for self-glorification but as a testimony to the work of God's Spirit within him, and for the sake of saving the souls of others. He struggled with temptations and believed he could overcome them in the power of the Spirit, yet misled more women than his hagiographers have felt comfortable with. Like the Apostle Paul, whose words he read and reread, quoted and quoted again, he was a 'sign of contradiction' – a figure that divided, repelling some, attracting others, a person impossible to live with, yet somehow filled with something that captured and motivated people towards a better life.

And his legacy is similarly paradoxical – there can be little doubt that his influence both in Britain and in the US contributed to the introspection, self-consciousness and individualism of modernity, and so ultimately to the dissipation of the structures and language that once constituted the self in a society with shared discourse and values. Yet he also offers profound challenges to these developments, and it may be worth reclaiming his heritage because of its potential to give people something to live for beyond the allures of immediate gratification in a world of consumerism, choice and transient commitment – the postmodern world explored in *Lost Icons*[1], a 'reflection on cultural bereavement' by Rowan Williams, now Archbishop of Canterbury.

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It's impossible to do justice to Williams' complex and wide-ranging work in a few sentences – but here's a sketch. His starting-point is the all-pervasive idea of 'choice', and its corrupting influence especially in the arenas of childhood and education. For, 'consumerism' privileges rivalry in relationships, and fosters an immediacy which destroys the notion of the long-term maturing of the 'self' in time. Constantly trying out new images of ourselves, we've lost the ability to tell our own stories. I recall a TV play I happened to see some years ago, in which a person was dying, and in conversation with those around, discovering the depressing truth that, not only was there no future to speculate about, but there was no narrative to tell about the past either.

Lost Icons suggests that, besides losing our own stories, we've lost a sense of responsibility for one another's stories; so that civil society degenerates into competing interests and identities, and politics into single-issue campaigning; while politicians and others blatantly excuse themselves when caught out, lack of remorse revealing the way in which all sense of moral responsibility has been undermined. All of us become victims, stridently asserting our rights and demanding a hearing. So the problems of society relate to preoccupation with the 'self' in such a way that the self becomes isolated. The literary critic Wayne Booth[2] speaks of our need to peel off layers of influence so as to get down to our true self, rather like peeling an onion, only to find that there's no self there. For, like the onion, the self is actually constituted by all the layers – the books we've read, the people we've related to, the stories that have shaped our perceptions of the world. 'What is lost,' writes Williams, '... is ... the possibility of understanding what it might mean to say that I am because I am seen at a certain depth, or that I require a faithful presence to hear my narrative.' 'The skills have been lost of being present for and in an other, and what remains is mistrust and violence.' Williams seems to be posing the question whether we can rediscover 'what it means for life to be lived beyond the self-referential framework of what I choose or understand'; or whether we can rediscover the expectation of grace. Let me put it this way: *Cogito ergo sum* has given way to "I feel, so in this instant, I'm alive"; what would happen if it became "I smile, therefore you are"?'

Much of what Williams describes is the result of modernity's suspicion of tradition, authority and, above all, religion. Religion itself has become a matter of choice – there for those who have a felt need, but privatised with many brands, still strong in the American marketplace, but losing out in Britain – now known as the hardest mission-field in the world. And the evangelical transformation of Christianity bears some

responsibility for this. If Christianity is a matter of a personal decision for Christ, if traditional ritual and nominal adherence is not enough for salvation but some direct religious experience is needed to convert you and precipitate that personal decision, then it is a short step to it becoming a private matter whether you participate or not, and ultimately a matter of choosing what suits you best. It all depends how you feel and whether you happen to be religious or not. Furthermore the whole onus is on the individual, whether they can buy all the stuff in the creed or the Bible; and fewer and fewer find they can sign up to it all, understood as it is in an impoverished literalising way. So religion is marginalised, and instead of contributing to a general sense of meaning and truth, it becomes the preserve of a defensive minority competing with other minorities for attention.

Of course, the corrosive effect of individualism cannot simply be laid at Wesley's door. Romanticism and the development of the novel reflect an increasing cultural focus on the individual in European history, culminating in more and more inclusive democratic governance. Furthermore, he belongs to a succession of influential figures in Western Christianity who have shaped what has been called the 'introspective conscience of the West'. Late twentieth-century New Testament scholarship exposed the ways in which the concerns of the Apostle Paul have been distorted by Protestant readings of his theology, readings which have their roots in St. Augustine. So Paul, Augustine and Martin Luther all come out as individual sinners who experienced the grace of God justifying them in Christ, removing their guilt and sanctifying them with the Spirit. They become the models of Christian conversion – not in the sense of becoming Christians when they had been Jews or pagans, but in the sense of having their guilt exposed and dealt with, so that they were born anew to life in Christ. And Wesley himself, at a quarter to nine on 24 May 1738, when someone was reading from Luther's Preface to Paul's Epistle to the Romans, felt his heart strangely warmed and felt he did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given 'that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death'. In publishing his account in the Journal Wesley was offering himself as a model or type for others, rather as Augustine had produced the first ever autobiography as a way of delineating the human condition and its solution in Christ. Wesley belongs to a succession of those whose personal journeys shaped a particular sense of what it means to be a Christian, focusing upon the salvation of the *individual* through the gratuitous forgiveness of sins and failings, and reading Paul to suit that picture.

Still the fact is that the tradition did provide people with a story to tell which gave meaning to their lives and a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves. It is easy to criticise, even mock, the Methodist tradition of testimony – the endless narratives of conversion following the same pattern, as people's feelings were played upon to the point where they imagined themselves into the classic pattern of response. Someone once gave me a bound collection of Primitive Methodist magazines and what immediately struck me were the Obituaries. If ever form-criticism could demonstrate its basis, it was here – the same pattern of godly life celebrated according to convention and stereotype, a set form into which each life was moulded. And yet each is a particular story of a particular adopted Son of God. And isn't that the point? Each was made up of the layers of influence and meaning that membership of an intense religious community provided, and these layers constituted the self. The self was able to mature and develop, feel genuine remorse, and authentic gratitude, because held in fellowship with those who dared to confront one another with their faults, support one another in their tribulations, pray with one another on a pilgrimage through the ups and downs of life. Introspection was shared, triumphs over temptation celebrated. There was accountability to one another and to God. You cannot pray to a God 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid' and then try to get away with it! I dare to suggest that it is the erosion of that inner sense of accountability that was led to the ever-increasing demands for public accountability, and the lack of trust which is degrading public services in this country, not least in education. If Methodism fostered individualism, it also provided a context in which that was tempered and shaped for the good of others.

For Wesley's legacy taken as a whole, rather than as narrowed down by at least some of his followers, provides much that *Lost Icons* regrets, as well as drawing on a broader Christian tradition than is represented by the introspective conscience of the West. We can get a taste of these things by considering three key themes of his preaching – the spirit of adoption, the spirit of holiness and the catholic spirit.

The spirit of adoption

Wesley saw himself as once serving God out of fear, like a slave or a servant, and never quite being able to do it – always struggling against the same temptations, never sure he was pleasing God, so always anxious, and embodying the spirit of bondage, or slavery, since fear of judgement was the sole motivation of his religious life. We might say he

had a poor self-image, was entirely wrapped up in self-concern, and the driving forces of his life were guilt and duty. But then he was granted the spirit of adoption – he was drawn into a different kind of relationship with God as the Spirit bore witness with his spirit that he was a child of God, that God loved him and Christ gave himself for him out of sheer love. So his obedience now arose out of the joy of a son who knew he was loved – his heart was engaged and his life filled with a different kind of spirit.

Granted the fact that the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith and other historic influences played their part, at its deepest level the spirit of adoption meant that love rather than duty had become the guiding principle and the motivating energy of all that Wesley would henceforth think or do. All actions and relationships were filled with a different spirit, and the consequences of what had happened could only be worked out in deeper commitment and service towards others. Salvation meant not just that *I'm* OK, but that the human race, whose members generally followed too much the devices and desires of their own hearts, or struggled out of conscience to do their duty – a classic recipe for hypocrisy – this *fallen* human race could learn to *love* in return for the gracious love of God who first loved us, and so could obey the double command to love God and love our neighbours. We can all receive the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, 'Abba, Father' and know we are God's children, and the Spirit of God can then transform our lives. Because 'those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen' (1 John 4.20), the spirit of adoption challenges all individuals who appeal to personal conversion-experiences to live differently in society. This naturally leads us on to the spirit of holiness.

The spirit of holiness

It is said that John Wesley was raised up by God to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. But what is it to be holy? Holiness belongs to God, and at its core is a sense of God's separateness, transcendence, aweful purity. In the Bible God calls a people to be holy and separate – 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' is a refrain through Leviticus. In the history of Judaism and Christianity there have been many groups who have sought separation from the world – Pharisees and Essenes, monks and Puritans. This separateness has devalued the word, making us fearful of being 'holier than thou', fostering self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

Yet Christianity was a revolution: this came home to me most dramatically when visiting the temples of ancient Egypt. In antiquity,

temples were like palaces – the crowds of subjects or worshippers were kept outside – only the priests had access to the royal divine presence. The same principle operated with respect to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple. As tourists, of course, we boldly entered the temples, and I vividly remember one where the images of the gods covered the walls, but as far as a human being could reach up, they had been defaced, chiselled out; and deep inside there was scratched the sign of the cross. Christians had invaded and challenged the old religious separation – for the Bible insists that living human beings are made in God's image, and Paul spoke of the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit. Christians gathered in houses to worship, they spoke of living sacrifices as they dedicated themselves to God. When they did eventually build places of worship, they were not temple-palaces, but basilicas – public halls where imperial business was transacted, places where people could gather to hear speeches and engage in debate. The sacred, the holy, was no longer separate.

No doubt John Wesley was barely aware of all that, but he did know early Christian texts which interpreted the Scriptures in terms of total dedication to God, so that God's holiness and perfection were embodied in the believer. He sought an interpretation of the Scriptures in accord with that of the early authors, and some of the texts which had most influence on him came from the early monastic movement – John Wesley democratised their ideology, recognising it as profoundly biblical. The Homilies attributed to Macarius he saw as

> Ever quickening and stirring up his audience, endeavouring to kindle in them a steady zeal, an earnest desire, and inflamed ambition, to recover that divine image we were made in; to be made conformable to Christ our Head; to be daily sensible more and more of our living union with him as such; and discovering it, as occasion requires, in all the genuine fruits of an holy life and conversation, in such victorious faith as overcomes the world, and, working by love, is ever fulfilling the whole law of God.

He published selections from these old homilies in the very first volume of his Christian Library. He found there his doctrine of Christian perfection, a process whereby, through Christ, believers are indwelt by the spirit of holiness, and so reach perfect love – love of God, love of neighbour, love even of enemies. Defending his controversial doctrine, he asserted that unless being a Christian means being conformed to the image of Christ and transformed into the self-same image through the

work of the spirit of holiness, God's promises are rendered empty and void.

'Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect', said Jesus, pointing to the mercy and generosity of a God who makes his sun rise on evil and good alike, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Holiness, then, is not separation, but a new quality of being, of openness like that of God, of generosity and mercy in relation to the whole world. And that introduces the third theme, the catholic spirit, 'catholic', of course, in the sense of universal.

The catholic spirit

John Wesley was a great controversialist. He knew his own mind and resisted vigorously what he saw as distortions of scriptural teaching – like predestination, or the idea that since we are justified by faith we sit quiet letting God do everything. No! The sheer grace and love of God towards us should so turn us inside out that we love with God's love – not just our neighbours but our enemies. Actually in Wesley's view most problematic was loving fellow-Christians. He knew all about people so concerned with right doctrine that their hearts were hard, and so estranged from God and neighbour. He also knew of simple people with saintly hearts whose doctrines were quite muddled. So in a famous sermon on the catholic spirit he typically went to the heart of the matter, spelling out what were for him the essentials of Christianity and suggesting that all those who know God's love and show it in their lives should shake hands, love one another, pray for one another, support one another – even if they belong to different churches.

For John Wesley covenant love lies at the heart of the gospel, and the work of God in people's hearts means that saints are recognisable across boundaries and divides. I think of the recognition accorded to the godliness of the Archbishop of Canterbury by some of our Muslim colleagues at the Seminar held in Qatar a few months ago. I think of the way covenant provides a backcloth for the possibility of acknowledging the dignity of difference in Jonathan Sacks' recent book[3]. I guess John Wesley would be delighted to find that in the present context his followers are engaged in the ecumenical movement and in multifaith dialogue. Yes – our fragmented culture can hardly hear his message in the terms in which it was proclaimed. Yet there are truths here which might speak to our culture, if only there are ears to hear, and we can find the right language – truths about the human condition, about the need for the self to mature in relationship with those who are different, by telling

constantly developing narratives that express identity, while respectfully attending to the stories that others tell, so as to negotiate difference.

Just this last week I was present at a performance of Charles Ives' Fourth Symphony. The programme notes quoted Ives' own account of the symphony's programme, and strangely enough the symphony seems to express what I've been trying to say. The sense of the short opening prelude 'is the searching questions of What? And Why? which the spirit of man asks of life'. The second movement is 'a comedy ... in which an exciting, easy and worldly progress through life is contrasted with the trials of the Pilgrims in the swamp'. (Presumably the American Ives is thinking of the Pilgrim Fathers.) This movement is wild, discordant, exciting, conflicting – a gigantic chaos requiring two conductors! The subsequent fugue is, as Ives puts it, 'an expression of the reaction of life into formalism and ritualism'. It's an utter contrast – melodious correctness, traditional harmony, noble serene music based on a mission hymn, an expression of old-world piety and assurance that all will be well, all manner of things will be well, since God's in his heaven. But as noted in the programme, after the experience of the second movement, it cannot pretend any more to be a complete answer to anything. Ives said that the finale is 'an apotheosis of the preceding content, in terms that have to do with the reality of existence and religious experience;' and the symphony is described as ending 'with what seems an enactment of Transcendence itself'.

Might it be possible to create an apotheosis of Wesley's insights for the fragmented culture of postmodernism?

Unto God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise, honour and glory, now and for evermore, Amen.

NOTES

1. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons*, Edinburgh and New York, T & T Clark Ltd, 2000.
2. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company we Keep*, An Ethics of Fiction, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988.
3. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*. How to acoid the clash of civilisations, London and New York, Continuum, 2002. Jonathan Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.