

TO BE A METHODIST TODAY: Reasonable or Enthusiast?

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Recently, I was reading over Volume Six (Tomos VI) of Wesley's Works in the Spanish translation (Obras de Wesley), published by the Wesley Heritage Foundation[1]. There we have the most important essays by the founder of Methodism in response to charges and attacks from some leaders of the Anglican Church around the middle of the eighteenth century. One of the main charges was that Methodism was a sprout of "enthusiasm". To be an "enthusiast", in the Rationalist and Deist philosophical and theological context of England at that time, was the equivalent of being a "fanatic", individualistic, given to emotionalism in religious experience. That seemed to be the opposite of the assumed ideal of being "reasonable", "moderate", "balanced", particularly in the area of religion.

Wesley wrote three successive essays with the title, "An Earnest Appeal to Persons of Reason and Religion" (Part I, Part II, New Call). These essays were in defense of the movement of spiritual renewal of the "people called Methodist", a movement spreading throughout the British Islands. In these writings Wesley carefully elaborates on the meaning of being "reasonable" and an "enthusiast."

Here in Latin America we have a pluralistic religious context with the presence of Methodist churches or traditions that arrived in our countries more than a century ago (originating from different Wesleyan churches or religious movements in North America), followed later on by new autochthonous churches of the same stream; this is quite a different context from the Established Church of England and the minority dissident churches of Wesley's day.

However, the reviewing of John Wesley's essay, noted above, reminded me of the standing question, "How do we understand our Methodist identity?" Are we, contemporary Methodists "reasonable" or "enthusiast"? Or, reasonable and enthusiast? Wesley addressed this question, in his defense of Methodism, with his mastery of scripture and with the rigorous logic he had learned and later himself taught at Oxford University.

1. "A reasonable religion"? Of course! Wesley starts with a very clear affirmation on the essence of Christian faith, which is not a human work but a gift from God, "There is a better religion to be attained,

a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love: the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, because God first loved us, and God alone is the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving of every soul which God hath made, every person on earth, as our own soul.” Is this not reasonable? “This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of humanity. Wherever this is, there is virtue and happiness, going hand in hand. There is humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering, the whole image of God, and at the same time a ‘peace that passeth all understanding,’ and ‘a joy unspeakable and full of glory.’” Phil. 4.7, 1 Pet. 1.8 “This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing.... Will you object to such a religion as this that it is not reasonable? Is it not reasonable then to love God? Hath he not given you life and breath and all things?...What have you which you have not received of him?...Whether, therefore, you do love God or no, you cannot but own ‘tis reasonable so to do; nay, seeing he is the parent of all good, to love him with all your heart...Is it not reasonable also to love our neighbor: every person whom God hath made? Are we not brethren? The children of one Father?”[2]

Reasonable, sure... but the way it is practiced and propagated is sheer enthusiasm! Or fanaticism, for “the persons of reason and religion” of that time, and probably for today’s “realist”, “mature” or “balanced” Christians...Wesley proceeds by explaining and laying the foundations of this understanding of Christian faith, and, as usual, appeals to Scripture, to reason and ... experience.

2. Is Methodism an enthusiast movement? In what way? What critics called “enthusiasm”, or fanaticism, was the emphasis that these beliefs can be experienced at the depth of our being, as the sustaining reality of our life, with personal certainty (“assurance”), together with its foundation in the Scriptures. For instance, Wesley lifts us biblical metaphors on the nature of faith: “Faith is the demonstration of things unseen”(Heb. 11:1)...it is the divine evidence by which the spiritual person can discern for the spiritual world what the senses are for the natural world...”

Wesley tries to explain it in a simple and reasonable way: faith according to the Bible record is “the eye of the soul”, by which the true believer can see the invisible One (Heb. 11:27)... it is “the ear of the soul” through which the sinner can hear the voice of the Son and live (Jn 5:25, Mt 2:5). And, “if it is allowed to me” –Wesley goes on–“faith is the soul’s palate”, by which the believer “tastes” the good Word of God, “savours” that God is kind, yes, merciful, to the sinner.(Heb. 6:5; Sal 34:8). In another treatise on “The Marks of a Methodist”, Wesley summarizes the theme as usual, with a Scripture

text: "A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed in the heart by the Holy Spirit which is given to us" (Rom.. 5:5).

3. Reasonable and enthusiast in Latin América today? In Latin America, we are going through an explosion of pentecostalism and neo-pentecostalism, besides the more recent wave of "new religious movements" and alternative individualist types of "spiritualities."

So, while some Methodist churches have been "pentecostalized", especially in worship style (the "praise language", music rhythm and body movements, the prominence of personal testimonies in worship), other Methodist churches have become more conservative in liturgy (differentiating themselves from more popular types of "evangelicalism") and moved toward ecumenical and social identity, particularly in the language of church declarations on social issues. The emphasis on "personal" faith or "enthusiastic" expressions is not apparent. We think, however, that, in line with our Methodist heritage, to be reasonable does not mean to be cold, detached, without enthusiasm, making a virtue of necessity. And, vice versa, the social dimension does not exclude, indeed, demands, the whole person.

Liturgy does not work without the personal and collective celebration. It is interesting to note that the Anglican Church of Wesley times kept that personal language of faith, through its collective pattern in the liturgy, preserving the wealth of historical Christian spirituality. Wesley stressed the fundamental importance of liturgy, collected in the Book of Common Prayer, particularly the Order of Worship and the regular celebration of the Holy Supper or Eucharist. But it was in hymnology, generated by the Methodist movement and experience, that the specific contribution of the "enthusiasm" of personal faith came up; faith experienced, affirmed, shared and... celebrated through song.

Charles Wesley (whose third centenary of his birth will be celebrated in 2007) was the "singer of Methodism", opening the gates of the "enthusiasm" of personal faith. Out of the more than 6000 hymns identified as his authorship, many enrich the hymnbooks of all Christian denominations even to this day. Maybe contemporary Methodists preserve their personal spirituality through corporate liturgy and singing. Even though the fashion of occasional songbooks and the popularity of some contemporary music, songs and singers tend to make our repertoire more selective or reductionistic, through records and electronic networks.

This reminds me of the observation of a former missionary to Latin America, Legrand B. Smith, "enthusiastically" fond of hymnology, who said that our churches should keep both the "hymnbooks" - with all the wealth of the spiritual heritage of centuries of the Christian Church - and the "songbooks",

for the singing along the way, more contextualized to our place and time, and, consequently provisional and open to revision once in a while.

All of this suggests the importance for us as Latin American Methodists, and to all those who are inheritors of the Wesleyan stream of Christianity, (“Wesley’s grandchildren”, as a Pentecostal bishop put it) of the need to face the question, “Are we reasonable or enthusiast”; reasonable and enthusiast in an inclusive way?

The fact is that Methodism, as Wesley understood the movement of “the people called Methodists,” does not pretend to be anything else but the “old Christianity”, the old biblical faith of the love of God “with all our minds, all our hearts, all our strength and all our being.” And this requires all the human enthusiasm to celebrate it, as expressed in Charles Wesley classic hymn:

“O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,
the glories of my god and King, the triumphs of his grace!”

[1] Obras de Wesley, Tomo VI, Defensa del Metodismo, trad. Mortimer Arias, Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1996.

[2] John Wesley quotations from “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” Volume 11 / The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley Edited by Gerald R. Cragg - Abingdon, Nashville, 1989