



Mapping Global Methodist Theology

Paul W. Chilcote

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Introduction

In 1964, Albert Outler published an anthology simply entitled *John Wesley*. As many of you know, this anthology of carefully selected writings appeared in the Library of Protestant Thought. Outler served on the editorial board of this series, but when he suggested a volume devoted to Wesley, he told me that he was nearly laughed out of the room. He said that one of his colleagues reminded him it was a series devoted to Protestant *thought* and questioned whether Wesley had anything to offer in that arena. But Outler was persistent and got his volume, only by agreeing to edit it himself. Not too long before his death, he announced with great pride that, of all the volumes in that series, *John Wesley* was the only one still in print. Regardless, a lot of scepticism with regard to 'Methodist theology' remains. How often have you faced the question 'Do Methodists even have a theology'?

Methodist theology is elusive. When John Wesley attempted to describe *The Character of a Methodist* (1742), he began by telling the reader what a Methodist is not. The distinguishing marks of the Methodist, he observed, are not a peculiar set of opinions, notions, doctrines, actions, or customs. Methodists are those, he claims, 'who have the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto them'. The clear and primary goal of both Wesley brothers was spiritual renewal. But a theology of faith working by love undergirded their efforts, to be sure, and it quickly took on a normative character in the life of the movement. Over time, formative expressions of Methodist theology further defined the spiritual heirs of the Wesleys in multiple historical and cultural contexts as the movement expanded, literally, around the globe. In this brief address, I seek to provide a map of these global Methodist theologies.

Wesleyan Origins: Normative Methodist Theology

John and Charles Wesley viewed their theology and practice as aligned with the Anglican heritage in which they stood. Their vision of a lived Christian theology can be encapsulated in the simple phrase 'faith working by love leading to holiness of heart and holiness of life' (Gal 5:6). They sought to bring balance to the Christian life and restore vitality to the church they loved, undergirding the Methodist movement with a robust and normative theology of grace and love. But both brothers devoted their sizeable energies to practical theology, one as a 'folk' and the other as a 'lyrical' theologian. What Randy Maddox claims of John applies equally to Charles: 'Wesley would not have understood the defining task of theologians to be developing an elaborate system of Christian truth-claims for

the academy. His task was, instead, nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers' lives in the world'.¹ Both were serious theologians, but their approach to theology reflected a more ancient model of 'practical divinity'.

The normative Wesleyan practical theology, both taught and lived by the brothers, consists of five key elements:

- *Transformation* – The inherent purpose of theology, according to the Wesleys, is personal and social transformation, not the mastery of ideas or theological concerns.
- *Contextuality* – The Wesleys were concerned about developing contextually appropriate embodiments of the gospel, not formulating timeless principles or definitions of truth.
- *Conjunctivity* – The Wesleys embraced an integral or holistic conception of Christian faith and practice that was simultaneously intellectual, affectual, and volitional.
- *Praxis* – The Wesleys conceived the practice of the Christian faith as the starting point and the goal of theological activity in which real life sparks engagement and reflection.
- *Singing* – The Wesleys sang their theology in community with other Christians who used this primal practice to express both words to and words about God.

Divergent Streams: Formal Methodist Theology

At the close of the 18th century, the mantle of Methodist theology passed to the next generations of leadership in a movement—becoming a church—in both the British and American contexts. As may be well expected, questions related to the continuity and discontinuity of subsequent Methodists with Wesleyan theology loom large. Three of the Wesleys' theological successors—John William Fletcher (1729–85), Adam Clarke (1762–1832), and Richard Watson (1781–1833)—sought self-consciously to preserve continuity with the practical theology of the founders, albeit in a more scholastic or academic mode. As Methodism progressed further into the new century, it began to assert an identity distinct from the Church of England, losing some of its original moorings. The different cultural setting of Methodism in America cannot be overemphasised. Initially, American Methodist theology retained a sense of connection with its origins, but its direct engagement with competitive theological perspectives in the New Republic shaped it in distinctive ways. A chasm began to form between Wesleyan and Methodist theology, exacerbated by the nature of frontier religion.

American Methodist camp meetings reinforced heart religion, emphasising the monumental spiritual changes wrought by the Spirit in the lives of individuals. This was Wesleyan, to be sure, but the ecumenical nature of frontier religion also led to a more broadly defined evangelicalism within Methodism. The lyrical theology of Frances Jane 'Fanny' Crosby (1820–1915) epitomised these developments and contributed to the increasing chasm between American academic and popular theological discourse. The highly intimate, individualistic, and otherworldly orientation of frontier theology pervades Crosby's most famous 'gospel song':

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.²

In the changing and challenging terrain of the post-Wesley era, several distinctive streams of Methodist theology emerged: holiness, liberal, neo-Wesleyan, and contextual theologies. Any effort to map global Methodist theologies must take all these developments into account.

¹ Randy L. Maddox, 'Untapped Inheritance', in *Doctrines and Disciplines: Methodist Theology and Practice*, edited by Dennis Campbell et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 23.

² *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), Hymn 369. Public Domain.

The Holiness Theology Stream

Of the various streams that sprang from the headwaters of Wesleyan theology, the holiness stream was the first to emerge. Phoebe Palmer (1807–74), mother of the holiness movement in the United States and the higher life movement in Britain, was a product of the Second Great Awakening. In contrast to emergent conversion-centred theologies, Palmer's own spiritual quest led her to place renewed emphasis on holiness in Methodist theology. She insistently raised the question 'Is there not a shorter way to the holy life?'. Her answer was 'yes'. For more than three decades she promoted her so-called 'parlor holiness', developing a unique 'altar theology'.

Her 'shorter way to holiness' rested on three propositions:

- The Holy Spirit delivers believers from original sin as a consequence of their personal consecration and faith.
- These capacities are inherent powers in Christians as a result of prevenient grace or conversion.
- Believers can experience entire sanctification any time they want.

Variations of this Methodist holiness theology continue today among Free Methodists, Nazarenes, Wesleyans, and various Church of God traditions.

The Liberal Theology Stream

Developments following the American Civil War, in particular, and on both sides of the Atlantic, presented challenges to Methodist theologians. Changing attitudes about the Bible, new philosophical perspectives, and unresolved problems related to racism and social injustice, demanded a robust response from the church. Seismic shifts in Western culture shaped its response. Formal Methodist theology took a decided turn in the direction of philosophical theology and away from the foundations of earlier Methodism. In addition to this, three significant shifts further defined changes in Methodist theology: a movement from otherworldliness to this-worldliness; from passivity to activity in the world; and, in ethical practice, from symptomatic relief to systemic reform.

A stream of liberal or modernist Methodist theologians emerged who attended closely to these 'modern' challenges to classical Christianity and assumed an apologetic posture in relation to their 'cultured despisers'. The appeal to experience drew the particular attention of Methodist liberals, since this was one element of their theological inheritance providing a potent response to the challenges of the day. Rather than driving a wedge between religion and science, the theologians of this stream entered into dialogue with the scientific community and brought their insights to bear upon matters of faith. While some made an effort to claim their Wesleyan heritage in substantive ways, the vast majority ignored the Wesleys, questioned their theological veracity, and viewed their methods as products of an outmoded age.

A form of classic theological liberalism known as 'Personalism' emerged at Boston University School of Theology under the influence of Border Parker Bowne (1847–1910) who posited that the concept of 'Personhood' provided the key to reality. Albert Cornelius Knudson (1873–1953), the great systematic theologian of this tradition, characterised evolving Methodist liberalism in six terse points: the centrality of Christian experience, the immanence of God, the true humanity of Jesus, critical study of the Bible, atonement as moral influence, and a positive sense that the kingdom of God is being realised in history.

For half a century, this school of thought dominated American Methodist academic theology, particularly shaping the leadership of the church. One of the most significant second-generation personalists, Georgia Harkness (1891–1974), was appointed the first female professor in a major theological seminary. Described as an 'evangelical liberal', she embraced the principal concerns of classical liberalism: continuity in the midst of diversity, the importance of human experience, an optimistic view of life, truth wherever it might be found, social justice and change, and centring all things in God. One of her most popular theological texts, *Understanding Christian Faith* (1947), demonstrates her ability, like John Wesley, to speak 'plain words for plain people'. Boston Personalism reached beyond the

bounds of Methodism, serving as a foundation for the civil rights platform of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Four particular personalistic themes resound in his writings: the inherent worth of all persons, a personal God of love and reason, the moral law of the cosmos, and the social nature of human existence.

The Personalist recovery of a dynamic vision of the 'kingdom of God' and its realisation in history resonated with the pioneers of the 'Social Gospel' movement who sought to reclaim the centrality of the God's kingdom in Christian theology and practice. Methodist 'social gospellers' sought to apply the principles of Jesus's ministry to the transformation of society, to establish a new social order by eliminating the social evils of poverty and racism. Figures like Hugh Price Hughes (1847-1902) and John Scott Lidgett (1854-1953) reflected this same orientation as advocates of the Christian Social Movement in their own British context. These parallel movements elevated human experience, freedom, and responsibility and demonstrated the implications of theology for social ethics, bringing increased awareness to a social and global consciousness.

The liberal theological tradition continues to exert its influence within contemporary Methodism through two particular schools of thought: process theology and open and relational theology.

John B. Cobb Jr. (b. 1925), a premier 'process theologian', reflects the philosophical underpinnings of this theology in three points:

- Process and change characterise the universe.
- God contains the universe but is not identical with it ('panentheism').
- God relates to all through 'persuasion' and not by exerting unilateral control ('coercion').

The work of Schubert Ogden (b. 1928) and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (b. 1933) further explored a relational theology of God along the lines of this process trajectory. Thomas Jay Oord (b. 1965) coined the term 'open and relational theology' in his articulation of a theological vision that has challenged traditional ways of conceiving God, and while not strictly process-oriented, reflects some of the same concerns. With other 'open theists' he shares two critical convictions:

- God experiences time moment by moment (open).
- God and creation relate in such a way that all give and receive (relational).

This theology affirms that love is the ultimate ethic, all creatures possess some measure of freedom, all creation matters, life has purpose, science points to important truths, and transformation is possible.

The Neo-Wesleyan Theology Stream

The Neo-Wesleyan stream of Methodist theology consists of two distinct but interrelated currents. In the middle of the 20th century, a 'Neo-Reformation' movement within the Protestant tradition renewed interest in the theology of the magisterial reformers. It did not take long for Methodists who resonated with these developments to rediscover the theological relevance of John Wesley, their own founding figure. 'Neo-Wesleyan theology' emerged, in part, as a rediscovery and re-evaluation of Wesleyan theology – an 'ad fontes current' within Methodism. Simultaneously, and following the lead of Karl Barth in Europe and Reinhold Niebuhr in the United States, 'Neo-Orthodox' theologians levelled serious critiques against what they considered to be the naïve and wrong-headed optimism of liberal theology. Within Methodism, this movement can be described as a 'counter-liberal current' within the larger Neo-Wesleyan stream.

As early as 1935, there were glimpses of an 'ad fontes' rediscovery of John Wesley, but the real watershed in terms of renewed interest in the theology of the founder came with the 1964 publication of *John Wesley* by Albert C. Outler (1908–89), the anthology mentioned at the outset of this address. His depiction of Wesley as a serious theologian, albeit of a different order, helped to fuel a renaissance in Wesley studies, later to include Charles Wesley as well. Outler's contributions toward a new and elevated view of John Wesley as a theologian cannot be overestimated. His reappraisal led to an initial defence of Wesley's 'folk theology' as a legitimate form of theological

discourse. Outler located Wesley more squarely in his Anglican context and brought new insight to the three pillars of Wesleyan theology: repentance, justification, and holiness. Robert E. Cushman (1913–93) contributed to this rediscovery as well, explicating six basic propositions aligned with Wesley's vision. In this platform, faith is about:

- God finding us, not us finding God;
- life in crisis seeking reconciliation;
- a moral, not an intellectual, problem;
- the experience of alienation and reconciliation;
- 'awareness' of need, not the vindication of God's truth; and
- the way in which Jesus overcomes estrangement from God and others³.

In his book, *The New Creation* (1998), Theodore 'Ted' Runyon (1930–2017) deviated from the typical model of exploring John Wesley's theology as the order of salvation, began his analysis with the *imago Dei*, and described Wesley's vision of how God restores this image of creative love in people. Scholars like Randy L. Maddox (b. 1953) and Kenneth J. Collins (b. 1952) continue to advance this work in Wesleyan theological studies, and Paul W. Chilcote (b. 1954) has facilitated a rediscovery of Charles Wesley's 'lyrical theology'.

The counter-liberal current within this stream can be traced back to Edwin Lewis (1881–1959) who had been schooled as a Boston Personalist, but experienced a radical conversion during his work on the *Abingdon Bible Commentary* (1929), claiming that this exercise enabled him to rediscover the Bible for himself. Growing increasingly suspicious of his inherited liberal theology, in 1934 he published *A Christian Manifesto*, in which he railed against modernism and called upon Methodists to reaffirm the reality of God, the authority of the Word of God, the fact of sin, the divinity of Christ, the cross as the supreme event in the divine-human story, and the gospel as God's provision for the salvation of the whole world.

The confluence of the two currents within this stream can be discerned in the work of two particular theologians. Thomas C. Oden (1931–2016) subsumed his passion for Wesley under the aegis of a larger 'paleo-orthodoxy' project, an effort to advocate classical Christianity in the face of postmodern challenges. The British Methodist theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright (1939–2020), reflected similar tendencies in his attempt to wed the ancient liturgical heritage of the church with Wesley's primitive Methodism. He produced a systematic theology entitled *Doxology* (1980), building upon a 'pictorial method', demonstrating the inseparability of worship and theology, and identifying the worshipping community as the proper matrix of theology. Three 'pictorial statements' present his main theses:

- a medieval tomb sculpture depicting Christ on the cross with outstretched hands holding the sun and the moon;
- a Charles Wesley hymn representing God's great self-emptying (*kenosis*);
- a dialectic narrative of God presently experienced and God's consummation yet to come.

While Stanley M. Hauerwas (b. 1940) reflects the counter-liberal current within contemporary Methodism, he also 'represents practical divinity in a thoroughgoing way'.⁴ Theology and ethics are distinct but inseparable as are theory and practice. Practice shapes understanding, which shapes practice. Theological conviction must be embodied; faith must find expression through action. Working within the tradition of 'virtue ethics', Hauerwas, like the Wesleys, puts 'character' and its formation at the very centre of his theological agenda, explicated most richly in his highly acclaimed book, *The Community of Character* (1981).

The Contextual Theologies Stream

The fourth stream of Methodist theology, due to its contextual definition, subdivides into a number of branches. The image of a waterfall might be a more appropriate metaphor for this most recent development. The waters of the

³ Robert E. Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981), 54–69.

⁴ Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 223.

tradition simply cascade into a myriad of streams and cross-currents, reflecting the unique contexts of Methodism around the world today. Even before the emergence of the revisionist trends of postmodern theology, many had argued the inescapable contextuality of all theological discourse. This reaction against the Enlightenment claim for universally demonstrable and applicable truth-claims stipulates that all truth is inextricably bound to unique and diverse cultural and historical contexts. Postcolonialism and ecumenical dialogue led to an increasingly positive valuation of contextuality in theology, particularly as previously muted voices joined the chorus. These developments necessitated a complete 'rethinking of the essential nature of theology, looking for ways to relate it more integrally to the praxis of specific communities of faith'.⁵ In this arena, Methodist theologians have made substantial contributions to the black and womanist, liberation and feminist, and various indigenous branches of this ever-widening stream.

Black Theology: Black theology in America found its earliest expression in the hymns of Charles A. Tindley (1851–1933), one of Methodism's greatest lyrical theologians. While honest about the centrality of suffering in the story of his people (their crucible) the theology of his hymns also strikes a note of hope about a social gospel that can transform the world (their resurrection). The context of oppression and discrimination out of which Tindley wrote shaped his sung theology in ways unique to the black experience. Three particular themes dominate: the pilgrim way of suffering – the experience of the black community (personal holiness); the goal of heaven – a counter-vision to the injustice of this life (apocalyptic hope); and the salvation of Jesus – a celebration of the joy and liberation of salvation through an 'elder brother' (moral transformation of evil by love).

James H. Cone (1938–2019), a professor of systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, questioned the white supremacist perspective of theology in an initial and watershed volume on *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). The following year he systematised his themes in a second volume, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), identifying the enslavement of black people as the central problem that American theologians must address. Employing a hermeneutic that begins with the reality of oppression and a methodology that views these concerns through the scriptural lens of 'the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus', he insists that the God of the Bible battles oppressors and actively seeks freedom for those in bondage by engaging actively in the human situation. While 'blackness' functions as a symbol for all oppressed people, he stresses the importance of the black community as the matrix of authentic theology, that place in which people discover their worth and find meaning together.

One of Cone's doctoral students, Jacquelyn Grant (b. 1948) helped found 'womanist theology', a movement which gives voice to the concerns and theological perspectives of black women. Her book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989) explores Christological themes from the perspective of black women who are both 'the oppressed of the oppressed' and 'the particular within the particular'. Anthony G. Reddie (b. 1964), a Fellow of Wesley House and a founding editor of the international journal *Black Theology*, is a British Methodist of Caribbean descent. In works such as *Black Theology* (2012) and *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity* (2016), he articulates a participative approach to theology in community that interfaces black theology and decolonial, transformative education.

Liberation and Feminist Theology: In an effort to decolonise theology and speak to the concerns of oppression in Latin America, a number of Methodists addressed these tasks directly, but none more effectively than the Argentinian José Míguez Bonino (1924–2012). As one of the founders of Latin American 'liberation theology', he attempted a thorough-going application of the gospel to his cultural setting in a book of that title in 1986. He levelled acute criticisms against forms of Methodist theology that 'yielded to a radical individualism and has adopted the values of reigning cultural, economic, and political powers'.⁶ 'His theme is the Kingdom and his leitmotif is love, incarnate love', claimed Mortimer and Esther Arias, 'mediated in history through human solidarity and commitment to the oppressed'.⁷ His agenda upended traditional theological hermeneutics, starting with the plight of the poor and oppressed who engage in a communal praxis of the biblical witness.

⁵ Maddox, 'Untapped Inheritance', 50.

⁶ Langford, *Practical Divinity*, 239.

⁷ Esther and Mortimer Arias, *The Cry of My People* (New York: Friendship Press, 1980), 131.

Bonino paved the way for a number of other liberation theologians who applied his 'praxis method' in their own contexts. Theodore W. Jennings Jr. (1942–2020) levelled a critique against 'first world' values, economic systems, and institutionalised injustice. In his *Introduction to Theology* (1976), he provides an initial presentation of his deconstructionist agenda. He identifies latent liberationist themes in the creeds, liturgy, and critically assessed scripture, affording a vision of a just God deeply engaged with the poor and oppressed. Three words dominate *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (2002) by Rebecca S. Chopp (b. 1952): proclamation, emancipation, and transformation. The most significant feminist theologian of Methodism, she locates the praxis of solidarity with suffering persons at the heart of the Christian vision in *The Praxis of Suffering* (2007). Joerg Rieger (b. 1963), a German-born liberationist, understands theology to be a transformative agent in the world. With much of his work focusing on global economic injustice and the dehumanizing effects of 'empire', he advocates 'deep solidarity' with those harmed by unjust systems. In *No Religion but Social Religion* (2019), he and a team of Methodist scholars interface liberationist themes with the Wesleyan theological inheritance.

Simeí Monteiro (b. 1943) gives lyrical expression to these themes of emancipation in songs that capture the spirit of her native Guarani culture. The metaphor of pilgrimage or journey pervades her hymns, amplifying the themes of *familia*, *comunidad*, and *justicia*.

If walking is our vocation, surely we'll walk with each other.
Our faith will be great and glorious and it will move even mountains.
We'll open frontiers of challenge removing all human barriers
because we now follow Christ in hope and joyful solidarity.⁸

Indigenous Theology: Methodists helped pioneer the 'modern missionary movement' that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. While many missionaries communicated a gospel captive to their own culture, it was only inevitable that their converts would shape this message and its practice into forms consonant with their own lives and contexts. In the 20th century, greater attentiveness to the contextuality of all theology led to the rise of a number of Methodist indigenous theologies across the globe, particularly in Africa and Asia. A distinguished alumnus of Wesley House, E. Bolaji Idowu (1913–95) led the Methodist Church in Nigeria from 1972–1984. He immediately initiated a program of church reform, emphasizing the need for autonomy and indigenisation. In fact, this reflected longstanding concerns he had already articulated in a book entitled *Towards an Indigenous Church* (1965). One of the early exponents of 'ethnology', he engaged in efforts to rediscover and correct misconceptions about the religious ideas of his own Yoruba people.

Kwesi Abotsia Dickson (1929–2005) employed similar methodological approaches in relation to the recovery of his Akan heritage in Ghana. Like Idowu, his study of African religion and culture preceded his engagement with Christian theological concerns. In his most significant theological work, *Theology in Africa* (1968), he sought to explicate the inseparability of culture and religion. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b. 1934), a self-described African liberation and African women's theologian, affords a compelling indigenisation of the gospel in her efforts to address the pressing questions of her people: how have African religion and culture influenced the experience of African women? And how have economic systems oppressed them? In 1986 she published *Hearing and Knowing*, her first theological reflections on Christianity in Africa—a precursor to her edited volume, *Beads and Strands* (2004), in which she focuses on African wisdom related to community and neighbourliness.

Patrick Matsikenyiri (1937–2021), the foremost contributor to sacred song in African Methodism, sings and dances theology in community. Born in Zimbabwe, Matsikenyiri forged an indissoluble link between the political and contextual realities of life and spiritual liberation. He subscribed to a 'lived lyrical theology', undergirded by the famous Shona proverb: 'If you can talk, you can sing. If you can walk, you can dance.' In virtually all his compositions, the rhythmic melodies and dancing schemes communicate a contagious spirit of rejoicing. His most famous song, 'Jesu tawa pano [Jesus, We Are Here]', originally composed as a gathering song for Holy Communion, excites the community into 'jubilant praise'. The sung words and the danced rhythms of this song communicate a theology of joy experienced and lived in community.

⁸ *Global Praise I* (New York: GBGMusic, 1997), no. 15. Words: Simeí Monteiro © 1997. Used by permission.

One of the significant non-Western Methodist theologians of the mid-20th century was Daniel T. 'D. T.' Niles (1908–70) of Sri Lanka. His theology represented a broad amalgamation of his Hindu heritage in Tamil culture, Charles Wesley's hymns, the spirituality of E. Stanley Jones's Ashram movement, and his multiple activities in the ecumenical movement. His most significant contributions are to be found in his efforts to interface traditional Western theology with his Asian culture. He placed particular emphasis on the concept of the Trinity because of its affinity with the Asian idea of 'wholeness'. Having described evangelism as one hungry person showing another hungry person where to find bread, his book *Eternal Life Now* (1946) presents his ideas through this missional lens.

Emerito P. Nacpil (b. 1932), a United Methodist bishop and theological educator in the Philippines, emphasises the need for Christianity to be expressed in a multiplicity of cultural forms; participation in culture, and not its critique, must characterise living communities of faith today. The following values govern his efforts to express an indigenous Asian theology:

- awareness of the diversity of cultures;
- recognition of real human needs;
- development of healthy and resilient communities; and
- engagement in constructive change on the basis of ethical imperatives.

Choan-Seng Song (b. 1929), one of the most widely published Chinese theologians, orients his theology around the shibboleth of Western Christian individualism and the way in which it alienates Asian peoples from their native cultures. Borrowing much of his methodology from liberation theology, in works such as *Third-Eye Theology* (1979) and *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (1986), he introduces the theme of 'story theology', steeped in Asian motifs. In his book entitled *The Wounded Heart of God* (1993), the South Korean Andrew S. Park (1993), seeks to integrate the Asian concept of 'han' – a critical tenet in his 'theology of the wounded' – and the Christian doctrine of reconciliation.

All these Methodist contextual theologians acknowledge the inseparability of lived Christian faith and concrete socio-historical contexts. They are incarnational in the sense of recognising God's activity in all that God has created in its diversity and specificity. They are sacramental in the sense of perceiving God's presence in the ordinary aspects of real life, including the struggle for meaning and justice. They are dialogical in the sense of celebrating the identity of the local as a concrete form of Christian expression engaged in mutually enriching and challenging conversation with other contextual embodiments of the faith.

The Character of Methodist Theology

Given the diversity of theological expression within Methodism, are there any dominant characteristics that convey the enduring sense of a 'Methodist tradition'? Do efforts to define Methodist theology remain elusive under the circumstances and given the complex story of Methodism to which it is inextricably bound? As I have sought to demonstrate, there are a myriad of Methodist theologies delineated in four primary streams that emerged from the headwaters of Wesleyan theology. While an 'organizing principle' or a 'grammar' might be identified for the theology of John Wesley, or distinctive Methodist streams, do these various streams that constitute Methodist theology actually fit into a coherent whole? Early 21st-century polarisation, reflected in Methodism as well as society, raises serious questions about cohesion within the tradition. Different understandings of scripture and how it functions within the community of faith—the underlying cause of much division— threaten to fracture Methodists along the fault line of biblical hermeneutics. Despite the obvious difficulties, British Methodist and former Principal of Wesley House, Brian Beck, inquires, 'are we theologically more coherent than we think we are'?⁹

Several simple observations on an operant level provide insight with regard to these hard questions. Perhaps one of the most unique features of Methodist theology is the fact that it permits such diversity; the elusive nature of theological distinctives may itself be a major characteristic of the tradition. This posture of openness—openness to different truths, cultures, contexts, and voices—describes much of what this survey has revealed. The inclusion of

⁹ Brian E. Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2018), 123.

women in this story, in itself, illustrates the open character of Methodist theology. Likewise, Methodist theologians across the spectrum emphasise the possibility and necessity of transformation in life – transformation of individuals, communities, social systems, the world. This purpose of transformation permeates Methodist theology and reflects the understanding that faith must be translated into action, bringing about purposeful change, growth, and restoration. Methodists are a singing people who have communicated and inculcated their theological vision through the power of singing. ‘And may God give us faith to sing always’, declares Fred Pratt Green. The content of the various Methodist theologies does not provide the cohesive elements to fashion a distinctive theological tradition. Rather, the *posture* of Methodist theologians and communities, their understanding of the *purpose* of theology, and the *power* of singing the faith define Methodist theology as an *open*, *transformative*, and *sung* celebration of God’s grace and love.

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