

**Evaluations of Paper Proposals for the 1999 WTS Meeting  
Southern Nazarene University, March 5-6**

**Proposal submitted by:** Phillip Meadows, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary

**Topic:** "Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Religions"

Comments by the evaluator:

\_\_\_\_\_ This proposal should not be accepted for use in the 1999 program.

\_\_\_\_\_ This proposal should be discussed during the conference call.

Evaluator's name \_\_\_\_\_



Wesley criticised the failure of Christians live in the truth of this as 'practical atheism' – an attitude of excluding God from the world. Authentic Wesleyan spirituality, on the other hand, is about 'seeing God in all things' – including the whole of the world in the purposes of God. With Wesley, Christians can learn to read the world providentially: a 'creation theology' which entails an openness to the presence and purpose of the Spirit in the religions of the world.

### **(3) The Grace of God**

Hypothesis: that the idea of 'grace' is about the presence and activity of the Spirit in all human beings leading them to salvation.

Providence and grace always go together in Wesleyan theology. The idea of providence as the universal presence and activity of the Spirit in the world grounds the idea of prevenient grace as the universal saving presence of the Spirit in human life. From this follows (1) the universal self-revelation of God through human conscience, (2) the universal possibility of salvation for all who would respond to God, and (3) the universal work of God to bring about holiness of heart and life in all those who do respond. In Trinitarian terms, providence is about the Spirit of the Father supplying the needs of human beings as creatures; grace is about the Spirit of Christ meeting their need of salvation. Christologically speaking, the process of sanctification is grounded in the idea of Christ as the light of the world, the logos or wisdom of God, whose Spirit illumines, guides and empowers all people in the pursuit of holiness.

With Wesley, Christians can learn to read human beings graciously: understanding that all people are, to a greater or lesser extent, graced by the saving presence of the Spirit. No human being is in a state of mere nature and all human beings, including people of other religions, are 'candidates for heaven' (Fletcher).

### **(4) Providential Dispensations of Grace**

Hypothesis: that the requirement of holiness can be fulfilled in different ways through the variety of means and goals found in other religious traditions.

Following John Fletcher, Wesley favoured a 'dispensationalist' or covenantal approach to understanding the providential diversity of religious expression through the history of humankind. In this view, it is possible to speak of grace, faith, holiness and even perfection as existing in different kinds and to different degrees among different peoples. God calls all people, according to different dispensations of grace, to respond in faith to the degree of light providentially given to each in the pursuit of holiness. Christologically speaking, it is the Spirit of Christ that causes Christians to become good Christians, Hindus to become good Hindus, Buddhists to become good Buddhists, and Muslims to become good Muslims.

Other religious traditions can be seen as having providential purposes in God's plan of salvation for the world. It is God who calls all and equips all, in their different contexts, to be faithful and fruitful; and it is God who will judge what God does. Such a covenant theology of salvation can be a means of including the particular ways and the goals of other religious traditions.

### **(5) Orthodoxy and True Religion**



Hypothesis: that 'true religion' is first about holiness of heart and life, and only then about sound doctrine.

Wesley's theological orientation to holiness of heart and life caused him to defer the importance of doctrinal correctness in favour of ecumenical co-operation. True faith and holiness, as conditions of present and final salvation, are matters of right being and doing rather than right thinking. Wesley was not, however, indifferent to all opinion, because the way we think does condition the way we are and what we do. Christians can, however, critically affirm the mission of other religions in the common pursuit of personal and social holiness. The kingdom of God is located in the human response to the transforming work of the Spirit, wherever that is to be found.

#### **(6) Being Practical Theists**

Hypothesis: that Christian commitment to sharing in God's mission means entering into interreligious dialogue and co-operation.

Wesley might well have referred to the failure of Christians to see God at work in and through other religious traditions as a form of 'practical atheism.' The universal quality of human concern for the well being of others, for example, stems from the prevenient grace of God. Entering into co-operation with people of other faiths in the common pursuit of human flourishing is, therefore, about responding to what God himself is doing – in the transformation of individuals, communities and cultures. Sharing in God's mission is about becoming partners in providence - by responding to what God is doing through the church, and through other religious traditions.



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## **Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Religions**

Recent criticisms of the Christian theology of religions have revolved around the abuse of soteriological categories: exclusivists, inclusivists and pluralists alike have incorrectly assumed that all other ways of being religious are aiming at the same (Christian) goal. Cultural-linguistic analyses of religion, on the other hand, have emphasised the inherent adequacy of religious traditions as systems of faith and practice, providing different ways of being religious which embody means and goals often very different from those of Christianity. The force of such arguments, therefore, challenges the theologian to understand and include these different ways of being religious, with their own means and goals, within some unifying Christian perspective. In this paper, I shall enter into dialogue with Wesley's theology, and theologians of religion, to explore how this challenge might be met, and to offer some creative proposals for developing a contemporary Wesleyan theology of religions. In particular, I shall argue for the thesis that the process of sanctification – as the transformation of human beings in right relationship with God through the Spirit of Christ – can be extended to include people of other religions. Insofar as such a process of sanctification can be identified with the extension of God's kingdom, and the mission of God to heal creation as a whole, then we also have a specifically Christian 'metanarrative' for understanding the saving potential of other religious traditions in the divine purpose, and theological grounds for interreligious dialogue and co-operation.

### **(1) The Nature of Salvation**

Hypothesis: that the idea of 'salvation' is about the pursuit of holiness before it is about the going to heaven.

Christians have tended to place too great an emphasis on the eschatological dimension of salvation. Wesley's central practical-theological concern was, however, for the genuine transformation of hearts and lives in this life by the Spirit, with the goal of 'entire sanctification' or 'pure love.' For Wesley, there is a sense in which this is the condition for final (eschatological) salvation. Christological formulations are seen as grounding this pneumatological emphasis. An emphasis on sanctification can provide Christians with a way of understanding the salvific value of other religious traditions insofar as they promote holiness of heart and life. This suggests that all religions can be understood as means of God's grace and responsible human activity.

### **(2) The Providence of God**

Hypothesis: that the idea of 'providence' is about the presence and activity of the Spirit throughout the whole world to bring about human flourishing.