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Tradition and Change in Methodism

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John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of that Christian tribe we generally identify as Methodists or Wesleyans, was a stouthearted Protestant. Epistemologically he believed in *sola scriptura* as embedded in a wider vision of divine revelation that was generally skeptical of natural and speculative theology. His ponderings on the insecurity of natural theology left him at one stage thoroughly unsettled and close to suicide. It is true that his ponderings on the veridicality of religious experience brought him to an aggressive commitment to genuine perception of the divine that was organized in and around a novel appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Yet even these ponderings, to be valid, had to be secured by appeal to scripture. Hence he developed his epistemological ramblings through exegesis of scriptural texts like Ephesians 2:8, Hebrews 11:1, and most especially Romans 8:15–17. So Wesley's spiritual empiricism, while it was foundational in the sense that it posited a form of perception of the divine that was direct and noninferential, was also derived from scripture. Wesley wanted nothing less than revelatory foundations for his foundations. Every thought, including our thoughts about thought itself, had to be brought captive to Christ.

Tradition was important, but it was altogether secondary. By tradition, Wesley meant the non-biblical tradition of the church developed before the fourth century (Constantine was the great Corrupter), a tradition that was recaptured by the Anglican Reformation. Its role was hermeneutical, not epistemological. It enabled one to read scripture better; it was radically subordinate epistemologically to scripture. Reason also was subordinate to revelation. It was conceived not in a substantial sense but in a functional sense as a means of inference from data given in revelation and as a means of testing consistency and coherence. Reason fed off scripture; it had no content wherewith to challenge it (Miles 1997).

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Protestantism is, of course, a contested tradition, but Wesley is clearly a Protestant. Yet he is a Protestant with a difference. For Wesley might also be described as an Anglican pietist or a catholic mystic.¹ For him, the heart of Christianity was the encounter with and participation in divine holiness. Thus the material doctrines that became the driving force of his life were original sin, repentance, new birth, assurance, justification, and sanctification. He was constantly in search of the best way to capture the journey to a merciful, healing God. He was wedded to no slavish set of concepts at this point, but he was not diffident about the heart of the matter. Creation is in ruins through sin; forgiveness and new life have come through Christ; and the effects of Christ's healing work are available now through the work of the Holy Spirit, who characteristically but not exclusively works through a network of effective means of grace given to the church. Critical for Wesley was that every person in sight should come to experience personally the love and grace of God. The real enemy then was nominal and external religion. Forms (works of piety and mercy) were critical, but in themselves without the Spirit they were dead and dangerous. It was life in the Spirit, made possible by the work of Christ, made available now through grace, and expressed in a life of holiness that took Wesley's breath away. He is best described as an evangelist, a spiritual director, and a Father in God. He was not and never claimed to be a theologian or a philosopher (Abraham 2005).

Nor did he really want to start a new church. In fact, he had very limited abilities in this domain. He would have been happy to remain a renewalist, recovering for his day the heart of the Christian faith, reforming the nation and church, and spreading scriptural holiness across the land. His genius as a leader and organizer forced his hand precisely because he could not bear to leave those who had come to faith through his movement without the sacramental helps necessary for effective salvation here and now. So he crossed the controversial Rubicon for his spiritual children in North America and set them loose to form a new church. They were, as he put it crisply, at full liberty to follow scripture and primitive tradition. They gladly took him at his word, and at one point took him off the membership lists when he protested what he saw as unacceptable developments. Ever since then, those who can trace some measure of continuity of faith with Wesley and his early Methodist People have been divided both formally and informally on how best to carry on and express his legacy.² In this, they have been like every other tribe of Protestantism that has shown up since the Reformation. It will take some radical medicine to cure this disease, a disease for which there is currently no end in sight.

The challenges that hit the heirs of Wesley were both internal and external.³ There was initially the challenge of holding to any serious version of *sola scriptura*. *Sola scriptura* was really constitutive of Methodism as a version of Protestantism. It was the touchstone

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of the tradition. The threat from this angle was there from the beginning. It was dramatically visible in the musings of the Irish theologian, Adam Clarke (c.1760–1832), who taught himself over twenty languages, was three times president of the Conference, and had unquestionable credentials as a biblical scholar, preacher, and leader. Clarke denied the eternal generation of the Son from the Father on biblical grounds. It was not the adjective that bothered him but the noun. “Generation” signaled origination and dependence, and the Son could not be divine if this were the case. Tritheism is clearly lurking in the wings here, but Clarke as a self-confident biblicist probably never noticed. It was the first systematic theologian in Methodism, Richard Watson (1781–1833) (now reviled and despised), who saw the problem and tried to fix it. His solution was on the same level as Clarke’s: do better exegesis, systematize the results in a set of *Theological Institutes*, and show that Clarke was wrong. But the problem is now out in the open for all to see. *Sola Scriptura* is a kind of blank check waiting to be filled in by the latest expert in biblical scholarship.

Methodism has suffered the standard fate of modern Protestant denominations over the last two centuries: the experts (even when they share a common methodology or set of background beliefs) disagree, so the tradition is constantly torn asunder internally by disputes about its material commitments. The arrival of historical investigation of scripture simply inflames the situation. Historical criticism does not start the fire, because the fire was there from the beginning. It simply adds fuel to the fire by providing explosive materials that blow up the whole content of the tradition and, given certain philosophical assumptions, undermine the very idea of divine revelation on which the tradition rested.

This problem was brilliantly captured for the last generation by Van A. Harvey, initially a Methodist theologian, in his *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). Harvey later abandoned theology for religious studies. He provided poignant accounts of this transition in essays published in 1970 and 1981. The final paragraph of the latter essay is worth quoting at length.

One might say that the unbelieving theologian finds himself in the situation of Barabbas as described in the novel by Par Lagerqvist. Barabbas has his own knowledge, or what he thinks is knowledge, that Jesus did not arise from the dead on the first Easter. Barabbas was in the garden that first Easter morning and saw absolutely nothing. But he is deeply moved and attracted by the spirit of the little band of Christians, a spirit which is captured in the phrase “love one another.” He also is repelled by what he considers to be their false and fantastic beliefs.... In short, what we have in Barabbas is the doubt of someone who knows, or thinks he knows, that the Christian claims are false but who is drawn irresistibly by the form of life of those who do

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believe.... Barabbas, of course, was not a theologian, that is, someone trained to be an intellectual spokesman for the community of which he is an outsider. Thus, he could remain silent while forced to walk apart. The dilemma of the unbelieving theologian is that insofar as he remains silent, he is not a theologian, for a theologian is, virtually by definition, one who speaks. Therein lies the paradox. For insofar as he speaks, he also is not a theologian, because he does not speak to or for the community.

The Methodist drive towards holiness and corporate discipline was highly likely to create division as well, for these ideals were crucial to the tradition. The divisions come with the break from Wesley's autocracy, with the problem of slavery, and with rival accounts of what to do with Wesley's vision of sanctification. So we get African Methodists, Zionist Methodists, Union Methodists, Republican Methodists, Reformed Methodists, Primitive Methodists, Stillwellite Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, Free Methodists, and Nazarenes. Even before that, we had splits between Calvinistic and Arminian Methodists. Later the Holiness Movement within Methodism helped give birth to Pentecostalism. Pentecostals in time showed up inside the tradition repackaged as Charismatics. In both cases, we had further occasion to divide over the legacy. Throughout this history, we have a running debate over the relative merits of social justice and personal piety, a debate that now has been reincarnated in complex ways in terms of liberation. It is extraordinary that we have not formally divided over the debate in and around gay liberation. Clearly the tension between tradition and change has been volatile and divisive.

To be sure, all these disputes were shaped and flavored by wider developments in the culture. North American Methodism and its offspring have until recently been quintessentially modern. Motivated for evangelism and reform, Methodists have been determined to get the faith across to each new generation and were convinced that we could save not just the individual but society itself. So when the world went modern, we went after it in order to persuade it to come to faith. It is likewise when the culture becomes postmodern. We became and we become all things to all people that we might win some. Over time, this leads to worries about whether the faith we profess after a host of readjustments really is the faith, and we are off again on the merry-go-round of dispute and division. Conservatives swell forth to challenge what they see as apostate progressives and to reclaim the ancient tradition in the name of authenticity and faithfulness. Our efforts to fulfill the mandate to save souls have the unhappy consequence of driving us to relentless change and inescapable alienation. We are a dysfunctional family in which every proposed solution becomes the occasion for estrangement. Teetotalers by profession but not in practice, we simultaneously experience happy

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drinking bouts and painful hangovers. Yet, we manage somehow to keep up a good face in front of the neighbors.

One of the cheerful results of this unpleasant state of mind and soul is the creation of universities. Indeed, we scarcely could identify where we are religiously and epistemologically without formation in a host of disciplines that are central in the modern university. History, sociology, philosophy, and, of course, theology (with its plethora of sub-disciplines) all are needed to keep the drink flowing. Intellectual work is both the result and the cause of attempts to resolve our disputes.

The initial reasons for the creation of universities by Methodists were, of course, thoroughly prosaic. Methodists wanted to provide vocational training for themselves and their neighbors, and they were keen to climb a rung or two on the social ladder. They also had a sense from the beginning of the intrinsic value of education, and this disposition undoubtedly fueled the building of universities. However, once created, the schools of theology in universities and the freestanding seminaries became sites of both theological revision and retrieval. Places like Boston, Drew, Garrett, Vanderbilt, Southern Methodist, Duke, Emory, and so on, developed their own ways of coping with the tension between faithfulness and change. So the merry-go-round was and is kept in motion by seminaries and universities that were built and sustained by Methodists. Those who love the life of the mind and its place in western culture should raise a constant toast to religion and theology, to the disputes they naturally cultivate, and to the educational institutions that have to be created in order to address the cognitive dissonance evoked by such disputes. To be sure, we all know that theology is banished now from the state universities, and its place in private institutions is precarious. Last year, I had to fight hard (but I trust with good humor) to hold a university-wide colloquium in my own university on the relation between robust faith and teaching. The cleverest opposition came from a brilliant colleague who presented himself wittily as both Jewish and atheistic. Even in those private institutions that were originally generated by primal religious identities, it is a constant challenge to create the continuing space where the deepest of human questions can be pursued with real freedom and gusto.

The crisis engendered by the intellectual vertigo we rightly and naturally associate with religious and theological diversity hit mainstream Methodism in the 1960s. This was a very exciting time for Methodism. Mainline Methodists found their champion in the extraordinary efforts of Albert Cook Outler, a leader who was at one and the same time a historian, theologian, ecumenical leader, brilliant raconteur, enthusiastic teacher, and ecclesiastical engineer (Parrott 1999). Through Outler, Methodists discovered tradition and worked mightily to make it into virtue in the normative landscape of theology. By Outler's time the conservatives had been packed off to the backwoods in Kentucky, leaving all the other options to be brought together in a big-tent version of Methodism.

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The vehicle for Outler's strategy was a wonderful mixture of fresh historical work on Wesley, a badgering espousal of pluralism and diversity, an unmatched rhetorical commitment to church unity, and above all the invention of the quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

The quadrilateral basically proposes that we resolve theological disputes by a judicious appeal to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (see Outler 1991). To put it crudely, mix and stir and the result will be both faithful and relevant. The quadrilateral was crucial at several levels for Methodists. It provided the appearance of continuity (and hence faithfulness) to Wesley; it gave everybody a place at the table (the contesting parties could latch onto their favored element); it settled once and for all the problem of the authority of scripture (even those who questioned scripture had to use the elements of the quadrilateral, hence it was pragmatically if not transcendently secure); and it provided a self-confident but actually declining church with a proper standard of doctrine for all time (or at least for the next two hundred years, as Outler once told me in private conversation).

Another way to think of the quadrilateral is to see it as solving the problem of continuity and change, of faithfulness and updating, of authenticity and relevance, of past and present. Scripture and tradition take care of continuity, faithfulness, authenticity, and the past; reason and experience take care of change, updating, relevance, and the present. This formulation is strikingly Methodist, but it is also at the heart of all progressive and liberal forms of Christianity in the modern period in the West. The fundamental challenge is formulated in terms of how to be robust enough to be identified as Christian and yet flexible enough to meet the challenges thrown up by a changing culture. Overplay the robustness and one falls into fundamentalism; overplay the flexibility and one becomes the fleeting expression of the receding present. The quadrilateral looks like a godsend when seen from this angle. It is no surprise, therefore, that both conservatives and progressives have championed it enthusiastically. It was invented precisely to provide a middle way between extremes that every sensible person wanted to avoid. After some initial sniveling and sneering, it now has become commonplace even in the homeland of Methodism in England (see Marsh *et al*, 2004).

Has then one of the last and least of the tribes of Protestantism resolved the problem of continuity and change with a handy formula? Have we at last found a way to fix the challenges of change that nobody can deny? Should we all become Methodists, or failing that, pay Methodism the ultimate compliment by stealing its quadrilateral, as many are doing? Happily my questions are entirely rhetorical. The quadrilateral is no solution to the problems we face; it is a snare and an illusion. The challenge is to find a way below and behind the question it answers and then to move on to a better future. We go below the quadrilateral to the epistemological worries that led to its creation and deal with these comprehensively.

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The key to diagnosing this as a bogus solution to the deep problems we face in the epistemology of theology is to note the ambiguity of the term “Methodism.” “Methodism” can mean a version of modern Christianity, or it can mean a very particular school in epistemology. Methodists, as Roderick Chisholm argued in a seminal essay, are those who insist that our fundamental epistemological crises can be resolved only when we hit on the right method (Chisholm 1982, 61–76). The crucial problem, of course, is then to find the right method; and there is the rub. Methods are at least as contested and disputed as the particular propositions they are supposed to undergird. One way to think of the end of modernity is to think of it as a deep disillusionment about the quest for the right methodology. Another way is to see it as the end of epistemology conceived as the search for the right criteria of rationality, justification, and knowledge. Post-modernity can be understood readily as a placeholder for the intellectual responses engendered by disappointment with modern forms of epistemology. It is as if we have fallen into a black hole and do not know our way around anymore.

It is very easy to comfort ourselves at this point with claims about the inevitability of historicity, fallibility, perspectives, discourses, contingency, and the like. It is also very tempting to make our way forward by presenting our wares in the language of intellectual virtue and vice. We must be both faithful and open; we must strike a balance between authenticity and accommodation. We can even mask our announcements by disguising them as profound truths about the human condition itself and then offer the study of religion as the solution to the riddle of being human. If we want to launch an intellectual nuclear strike we can work up a charge of idolatry: any robust claims to knowledge (most especially knowledge of God) are self-serving idols.

The crucial point to register in all of this is that when we fall into these traps we have fallen into the black hole of epistemology. The only way forward when confronted with black holes in history or science is to keep on doing history and science; likewise the only way forward when confronted with black holes in epistemology is to keep on doing epistemology. The deep problem with the quadrilateral is that it is epistemology on the cheap. It is a slogan made up of abstract entities that is suitable at best for high school students, and it inhibits precisely the kind of careful work in epistemology that is essential. (On the current state of epistemology, see Moser 2002).

Commitment to the quadrilateral also destroys Christianity from within by betting the store once and for all on getting the epistemology right. The final outcome of this process for Methodists has been a matter of death by our own hands. We turned our religion into a theory of religious knowledge and in the very process ran the risk of losing friendship with the living God.⁴ Commitment to the right epistemology eclipsed our commitment to God. We can see the move towards a theory of knowledge in Methodism at its very inception and across the years. Methodism began as a hiccup in the history of

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Protestantism. Almost simultaneously the well-educated and eccentric Wesley brothers stumbled upon the reality of God in the spring of 1738. This staggering into the reality of God is (if anything is) the secret history of Methodism. It was primal knowledge of God as one's creator, lord, friend, consoler, lover, preserver, provider, judge, and savior. This is one reason our elder brothers and sisters in Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have found it so difficult to take Methodism seriously as an intellectual tradition. We are pietists, mystics, activists, and pragmatists. We always have been half-baked intellectuals in search of a tradition to house a treasure that is constituted by wonder love and praise. Our central doctrinal and practical concerns gravitated around participation in the life of God here and now. Without this participation we are as good as dead. (This dimension of Methodism is missed in Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence 2005).

So Methodism was not initially knowledge of this knowledge of God. It was knowledge and love of God (and then neighbor) *simpliciter*. But by the eighteenth century in the West as a whole, it was never enough to have primal knowledge; one also had to have metaknowledge. It was not enough to be acquitted and justified before God; one also had to be justified about justification. Wesley was trapped in this world from the beginning, and he never found liberation from it. Everything had to be derived from scripture as lodged in a theory of divine revelation. He was smitten with a deadly virus that he passed on to his offspring. They received his epistemology of theology joyfully as good Protestants. When that epistemology ran into trouble they invented or borrowed other theories (Chiles 1965). The climax of this process was the invention of the quadrilateral, when they fooled themselves into thinking that they now were fully grown up with an epistemology all of their own that would solve the conflict between traditional commitment and contemporary credibility.

The upshot of this analysis now can be stated plainly: the very attempt to name and resolve the conflict between faithfulness and change, between authenticity and relevance, is an epistemological response to the ongoing epistemological crisis of modernity and now postmodernity. Modernity itself is an effort to rid us of theological anxiety in the wake of endless theological disputes that began with first-order disputes about God and developed into methodological disputes about how to resolve those disputes. Postmodernity in its various guises is one more effort to resolve our anxiety by closing off debate or by making a virtue of our misery. The whole debate is exhausted and exhausting. Yet the intellectual dexterity and fecundity on display is a feast for sore intellectual eyes. Without this history our culture and our lives would be drastically impoverished. Happily, it will continue after we are all long dead and buried.

It now looks as if I have dug the grave of my own tradition and then fallen into it myself. I have insisted that Methodism as a theological tradition fell into Methodism as an epistemological tradition and hence committed suicide. So what do we do now?

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By its own lights, Methodism is nothing without knowledge and friendship with God. In this respect, it is the carrier of pivotal strands of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam across the centuries. The core of the tradition is encounter, liberation, inner-illumination, and salvation by the living God. It is existing in fear and trembling, in humility and confidence, in the midst of divine judgment and mercy. I am not here resurrecting the dead vestiges of liberal Protestantism or existentialism. These are ultimately artificial and reductionistic theories that seek to tame and accommodate a fearful and joyful encounter with God. This personal knowledge of God as experienced initially within Methodism was not some generic knowledge of God but knowledge of God evoked by encounter with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. It was knowledge tied to the name of God identified as the Holy Trinity. This is the very core of Christianity as developed by Wesley within Methodism. The proof for this, should it be needed, is to be found in the extraordinary combination of piety and doctrine developed within Charles Wesley's hymns, a standing monument to the heartbeat of Methodism.

Clearly one way to operate on the other side of such knowledge is to try to cut it lose from its original moorings in the tradition of the church. This is the way of liberal Protestantism. The agenda is to go below the surface to the experience and then rethemmatize and reform the tradition to meet the intellectual and moral challenges of each new generation. Many Methodists tried this attractive experiment over the last hundred years and more. Whatever the gains of this trial, it has run its course, only surviving where there are enough traditional evangelists to bring folk to faith in the first place. Theological liberalism is essentially a home for intellectually disillusioned evangelicals and fundamentalists. Both parents and offspring are addicted to epistemology. The challenge is to transcend epistemology and then to let epistemology fall back naturally into its place in human existence. This is a radical revolution of reversal. Confessional and canonical commitment are distinguished and separated out from epistemological commitment.

The radical reversal begins by insisting afresh on robust, concrete media of living faith incorporated in liturgy, scripture, saints, martyrs, sacraments, teachers, icons, creed, and the like. Just as we encounter human agents through their actions mediated through physics and chemistry, we likewise encounter God in concrete phenomena like creation, scripture, prayer, sacrament, conscience, singing, fellowship, preaching, and holy conversation. If these fail us spiritually, we are in the dark and nothing can save us. We become empty wine bottles. Tradition is a name we give to the networks of materials, persons, and practices that function soteriologically. Rather than cut back on the moorings, the challenge is to retrieve the old ones and invent new ones. The retrievalist half of this challenge calls for a complete rereading of the early history of Christianity; the inventive half of this challenge calls for sustained attention to the

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despised offspring of Methodism known as Pentecostalism (on the Pentecostal dimension of Methodism, see Lyall and Schubert (2005) on the Chinese Methodist, John Sung). Put the two halves together and we get an agenda for the renewal of the church today.

Notice here that this resists the move to make tradition into an epistemological category. What is handed over is a network of materials, practices, and persons in a community that dares to say that God can be encountered and salvation can be found here and now. This is offered in faith with lots of promises and testimony but with no epistemological guarantees, with no officially canonized theories of knowledge or proposals about authority. "Taste and see that the Lord is good," is the motto. In this way of handing over the faith, we recapitulate the development of the canonical heritage of the early Church. Deeply revisionist historical work is needed at this point to bring out the way in which the materials, practices, and persons of the Church were transmuted into items of epistemology that then became the site of endless debate and alienated us from the media of divine encounter and manifestation (see Abraham 1998). The very terms scripture and tradition were recast as criteria of justification to show how right we were in the face of those who disagreed with us. Theories of authority, of biblical and papal infallibility, are the necessary accoutrements of this tragic transposition of the inner life of the Church. Happily, God has mercy upon us and still meets us even in the media that we have turned inside-out and upside-down. Speaking humorously, we can lend God a hand by putting first things first and reversing this whole way of thinking and acting.

What has all this to do with life in the modern university or with our vision of education? From the days of Wesley, Methodists have been committed to living and dying in the world as we find it. To know this world we need all the resources that university education can supply. We are a people who think and let think. We insist on being open to truth wherever we may find it. Hence, if we stay with the dialectic between tradition and relevance, we are decidedly in favor of relevance. Because of our initial minority status and the sustained (and often violent) opposition of the establishment, our relationship to the great tradition of the church has been relatively robust, especially in the early years, but it has also been conditional. If the tradition and our theories about it get in the way of converting and redeeming the world, then the default position has been to abandon or to change the tradition. In this sense, we have been liberal, progressive, and revisionist. Playing out this default position over two centuries has left us scrambling anew to make sure we do not lose the first half of the dialectic, namely, the core of the tradition that made us what we were. It is that side of the conversation that now requires attention. With the failure of the ecumenical movement and with our collapse into interest groups, caucuses, and renewal movements, we are now at a point where we have to ask again: Who are we? and How do we preserve such treasures as we possess? These are the burning issues below the surface that are being formulated behind closed doors.

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The implications of this analysis for university education are as follows. First, we need a deep recovery of nerve in Methodist theology. We require what Professor John Webster (1998), in an Anglican context, has called “theological theology,” that is, theology that is unapologetic about exploring the nature of God as encountered in the life of faith within the great canonical heritage of the Church as received within Methodism. In a way, this is nothing new. It is in an obvious sense a recovery of “faith seeking understanding.” The emphasis falls, however, at this point in our history on faith, and it is faith both as living faith in God and faith as the great heritage of the church as refracted through Methodism. Without this faith we have nothing to bring to the table in the exploration between faith and the contemporary world.

Second, given that we want to understand all of creation in the light of faith, we need every tool and discipline we can muster to make sure that we understand all of creation and history as they really are. This is not to offer blank checks to every non-theological discipline to fill in with anything its heart desires. Such non-theological work has at least two constraints: first, there is the formal constraint of truth; and second, there is the material constraint of whatever truth theology brings to the conversation. This argument assumes that understanding is linked to truth, and that theology has truth to offer. It also assumes that in coming to faith we cross over a threshold into a new world of divine revelation that has the potential to illuminate everything.

Third, it is obvious that these are controversial claims that will be resisted in the academy for a host of reasons. We should expect turmoil and trouble if we proceed down this road. However, life in the academy is much the same as we find it elsewhere: it is more often than not marked by conflict, competition, power struggles, cognitive dissonance, turf wars, and strife. Truth of any sort is a hard-won achievement wrung from unending dispute and debate. So this proposal is offered as an asset, not as a liability. The challenge is to make sure that we do not allow this empirical reality to displace a whole-hearted commitment to intellectual virtue as the heartbeat of all education.

Fourth, given the secularization of mainline Protestant colleges and universities, implementing this kind of proposal will require creativity and money (see Cuninggim 1994). We need intra-university programs and centers to bring together persons of all religious faiths (and sympathetic secularists) so that they can pursue their specialist inquiries in the light of their deepest convictions and insights. In this arena, thoroughly robust forms of faith (including Methodist forms) must be empowered to find their voice in the wider arena of scholarship. Thus the narrowness and intolerance inescapable in university life can be both exploited and countered for the sake of inquiry as a whole.

Fifth, and finally, given that in all of this work epistemological inquiry is inescapable, we need to ensure that appropriate philosophical expertise is on hand. The debate about the relation between tradition and change is in crucial moments an episte-

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mological debate. It requires careful reflection (both historical and normative), for example, on the relation between revelation and reason or between tradition and divine inspiration. This is not to suggest that philosophy should be some sort of primary or privileged discipline. My claim is more modest: epistemological questions demand and deserve epistemological attention. †

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Notes

1. The term mystic, is, of course, a thoroughly contested designation. Mysticism, as has often been observed, has been out late at night and has kept some very bad company. Wesley was well aware of this and aggressively rejected some of the forms of mysticism that came his way, especially in the middle of the 1730s. He was especially uneasy with the love of solitude, the rejection of means of grace, and aversion to works. However, he shifted his ground over the years. Technically Wesley would appear to fall within the category of cataphatic mysticism. For an exceptionally good discussion, see Orcibal 1965.

2. Wesley himself gives various summaries of his legacy in his many treatments of Methodism. See for example his “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” “A Short History of Methodism,” “The Character of a Methodist,” “The Principles of a Methodist,” “Thoughts upon Methodism,” and “A Short History of the People Called Methodists.”

3. Throughout this paper I shall refer to the heirs of Wesley and Methodism as simply Methodists. There is no agreed designation but this one has the merit of long historical precedent despite its absence in North America in the last generation. It also fits with Wesley’s own clear preference. I shall speak unapologetically for the version of Methodism I know best.

4. This is not to say that we did not also turn it at times into a deadening bureaucracy, a middle class club, a scheme for revival, an activist political movement, a foretaste of speculative metaphysics, and the like. Here I want to focus on what happened to us intellectually.

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