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AN INTRODUCTION TO WORLD METHODISM

The world Methodist community now numbers over 75 million people in more than 130 countries. The story of Methodism is fascinating and multifaceted because there are so many distinct traditions within it, some stemming directly from Britain and some arising in the United States. In this book, the authors address the issue of what holds all Methodists together and examine the strengths and diversity of an influential major form of Christian life and witness. They look at the ways in which Methodism has become established throughout the world, examining historical and theological developments, and patterns of worship and spirituality, in their various cultural contexts. The book reflects both the lasting contributions of John and Charles Wesley, and the ongoing contribution of Methodism to the ecumenical movement and interreligious relations. It offers both analysis and abundant resources for further study.

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Preface

It is a genuine pleasure to have the opportunity to contribute this volume to the Cambridge University Press's series of introductions to world religious traditions. The editors determined early on that Christianity has too many variations within itself to be treated in a single volume, and our book will stand alongside introductions to Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and others. At the time of writing, the Methodist family of churches has over 75 million members and adherents throughout the world, and it exercises a powerful influence in ecumenical Christianity and interfaith relations. An account of the history, culture, and theological trajectories of Methodism intended for both students and general readers seems entirely appropriate for the beginning of the twenty-first century.

But the task of writing about Methodism as a world religious phenomenon is more easily proposed than achieved. One major difficulty is that the Methodist churches of today represent two quite distinct traditions. These traditions, of course, have much in common. Both trace their origins to the British Isles and to the life and work of John Wesley (1703–91) and his younger brother Charles (1707–88). Both traditions look to the Wesleys' pastoral-theological writings and hymns as sources of doctrinal, ethical, spiritual, and liturgical reflection. But even before the death of John Wesley, indeed as early as 1784, a separation of Methodism into a British and an American stream had clearly taken place, and the two streams had begun to flow in decidedly different directions. As a consequence, while many introductory volumes to British Methodism and to American Methodism have been written, rare indeed is a work that holds both traditions together.

Adding to the difficulties is the fact that on both sides of the Atlantic these vibrant traditions have enabled additional religious movements to come into being, each of them "Methodist" in its own way. For example, British Wesleyan Methodism not only gave birth to a variety of Methodist sects but was also the seedbed of the Salvation Army, a movement that remains

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Methodist in much of its theology. In the United States the Methodist Episcopal Church was equally fecund in producing Methodist offshoots and also gave birth to the immensely significant Holiness movements and, later, to Pentecostalism, both of which retain theological principles that can be broadly described as “Methodist.” An introduction to world Methodism will need to help its readers to understand these connections as well.

From its beginnings, the Methodist movement in all its manifestations showed itself extraordinarily able to adapt to a wide variety of social and cultural circumstances, thus adding to the complexity of the picture that must be drawn here. In Britain and the United States it was able to respond to the masses of people impoverished and dispossessed by the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as to large segments of the Establishment. This feature of Methodism is particularly obvious in the United States, where there were Methodist slaves and Methodist slaveholders, Methodist factory-workers and Methodist factory-owners, as well as a number of Methodist presidents, legislators, and state governors. Missionaries spread the complexities of Methodism further still, as both the American and British churches planted their particular brand of Methodism in the various mission fields around the globe. In these situations, Methodism adapted itself readily to non-European cultures, finding a home in Oceania, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Once again, both indigenous populations and colonizers responded to Methodism as a religious option, and large white Methodist churches have been part of the social fabric of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa.

To write on all of these themes demands more skills than any two authors can possess, and we owe an enormous debt to the work of others: historians, sociologists, biographers, journalists, geographers, social scientists, and church administrators. We ourselves bring, in the case of one partner, the tools of the church historian and specialist in liturgy and spirituality, and those of the missiologist and historian of religion in the case of the other. One of us is a Methodist from the United States who has lived for a long time in Britain; the other is a British Methodist who has lived for many years in the USA. We are, therefore, “participant observers,” looking from the inside at the traditions that have nurtured us, but seeking at the same time to apply to our subject the scholarly detachment in which we have been trained through our respective disciplines.

Accordingly, we aim to offer a picture of world Methodism that avoids certain tendencies that have shaped much of previous Methodist historiography. It is tempting for those writing from within their own religious tradition to engage in hagiography, and to downplay the sins and errors that

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are an inevitable part of any human enterprise. Readers of this book should expect that Methodism's failings will become as apparent in the following pages as its successes. Triumphalism in Methodist writings is a prevailing tendency that goes back to the earliest years of the movement, but we hope to avoid any suggestion that Methodism is a normative pattern for all Christians. Methodism's founder John Wesley is all too often portrayed as an ecumenical "man for all seasons," carrying within himself a quasi-magic elixir that can make Calvinists understandable to Catholics, or Pentecostals happy to be linked to the Orthodox. We shall do our best to assess him more objectively, "warts and all." Nor shall we try to present Methodism itself as a religious bridge between Protestantism and Catholicism, or between Anglicanism and the churches of the Reformation. Many books about Methodism try to offer some real or imagined Wesleyan heritage as the answer either to the current ills of Methodist churches themselves or to the disorder of the ecumenical world, but this seems to us neither accurate nor helpful. We are not crying "Back to Wesley." Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous for us as Methodist Christians not to attempt to show that there are resources in the Wesleys' thought and practice that can make a significant contribution to the theology and spirituality of the whole church.

Other concerns have also shaped the form and content of this book. We have tried to avoid any "single-model" theory of the origins and development of Methodism and will constantly stress that it has been from the beginning a variegated tradition. While some of these many forms that Methodism has taken have been compatible and complementary, others have been in direct conflict with one another. George Whitefield and John Wesley, both claiming the Methodist banner, aimed verbal blows at one another over Calvinism, Northern and Southern Methodists in the United States exchanged bitter words (and finally divided) over slavery, and both British and American traditions of Methodism have had more than their fair share of sectarianism and fissiparousness. It is hard to make bland comments about Methodists in general when they fall out so easily with one another on matters that seem to them to be the life and death of the Gospel, but which seem to the observer essentially irrelevant to their main task.

Like many revival movements, Methodism has sometimes been accused of vulgarity, and some writers seem to be slightly embarrassed by the more disreputable elements in Methodist practice, both early and contemporary. We are more likely to view these as signs of life and spiritual energy. On the other hand, we find it difficult not to be deeply discomforted by

Methodist involvement in wickedness: the compromises related to slavery or to apartheid, or the alliance of Methodist missionary activity with capitalism and imperialism, and it will be difficult not to comment on such matters. Nor will we overlook some tendencies within Methodism that have threatened to undermine the core values of the Gospel: for example, the propensity of the Methodist teaching about holiness to degenerate into personal moralism, and then into sanctimoniousness.

Current understandings within the discipline known as the study of religion have given us a particular perspective on this task. Following Ninian Smart we will pay continual attention to the six elements that he sees as constituting religious traditions: (1) ritual, (2) myth and narrative, (3) experience and emotion, (4) ethics and legal codes, (5) society and culture, and (6) the material dimension. Guided by the insights of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, we will treat world Methodism as a “cumulative religious tradition.” By this we mean that Methodism, like every other living religious tradition, is not an abstract set of beliefs and morals or an “essential reality” that is infused into people from the outside. Instead, each individual Methodist not only lives out of the tradition as it is transmitted to him or her, but also modifies it by context and experience. Consequently no two individuals’ form of Methodism will be identical, any more than is the Buddhism of any two Buddhists or the Islam of any two Muslims. To be sure, we can state some general propositions, but this will always be done with a certain reserve, and we will try to avoid sentences that begin “Methodists believe . . .” or “The Wesleyan stance is . . .” Toward this end our concern will be, wherever possible, to let individual Methodists speak for themselves, to focus on the “minute particular” within the great movements that have been part of the tradition.

In the end we hope to have given a fair impression of Methodism, both to those inside and those outside the tradition. We hope that Methodists, having read this book, might say, “Ah! Now I see why they do things differently over there!” and that non-Methodists might say, “Ah! So that is what makes Methodists tick.” But even if we succeed at the task we have set for ourselves, this book is intended to be no more than an introduction. Working within our limits, we have frequently dealt with matters of great importance in just a few sentences. There is guidance for further study in the Further Reading section and we also offer notes and commentary on the web at <http://www.brite.tcu.edu/directory/cracknell>.

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We are in too much debt to friends and colleagues in Methodist and other churches throughout the world ever to offer adequate acknowledgment of all that we owe. All that we have written has its origin in their conversation and in their writings. Where we can still recognize the sources of ideas and insights we indicate our indebtedness in the extended academic references posted on our web page at <http://www.brite.tcu.edu/directory/cracknell>. For the most part we are no longer conscious of who planted this or that thought in our minds and hearts, but we are grateful to teachers, colleagues, friends, and students who have shared with us in trying to understand the phenomenon called Methodism. We also say thank you to librarians and their libraries: this book would not have been possible without them. First thanks are due to Heather Carson, Curator of the Museum of Methodism at Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London, who provided invaluable assistance in finding resources, especially illustrative material, for this project; to Charles Bellinger, Theological Librarian of the Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, for maintaining an excellent Methodist collection; to Valerie Hotchkiss and Page Thomas for their helpfulness in our visits to Texas's outstanding Methodist Collection in the Bridwell Library in the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University; to Roma Wyatt at the World Methodist Council Museum and Library in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. We have also received timely assistance from the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church in Madison, New Jersey. Jeremy Poynter of Brite Divinity School contributed to our ability to illustrate this book through his digitalization of the photographs and his assistance with the web page. Our greatest debt is to the two great academic institutions in Britain and in the USA where we have taught over the last fifteen years: first the Cambridge Theological Federation, of which Wesley House and Westcott House are constituent parts, where we lived and worshiped ecumenically and came to understand Methodism through other eyes; then our thanks go to Brite Divinity

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Abbreviations

AME	African Methodist Episcopal Church
AMEZ	African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion
BCP	Book of Common Prayer
BEM	Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry
CCJ	Council of Christians and Jews
CHPM	Collection of Hymns for the People called Methodists
CMEC	Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (from 1954), formerly the Colored Methodist Church
ECMM	Ethiopian Church of Mangena Mogone
MC	Methodist Church in the USA
MCCA	Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas
MEC	Methodist Episcopal Church
MECS	Methodist Episcopal Church South
MNC	Methodist New Connexion
MPC	Methodist Protestant Church
MSB	Methodist Service Book
MSF	Methodist Sacramental Fellowship
OSL	Order of St. Luke
PM	Primitive Methodist
PMC	Primitive Methodist Church
SS	<i>Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America</i>
UMC	United Methodist Church
UMFC	United Methodist Free Churches
WCC	World Council of Churches
WMC	Wesleyan Methodist Church
WMMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society