

John Wesley and Political Reality

by Leon O. Hynson

On January 9, 1782, at the age of seventy-eight, near the end of the American revolutionary struggle, John Wesley wrote a short essay, entitled "How Far Is It The Duty of a Christian Minister To Preach Politics?" His response to this reflects the kind of political conservatism by which Wesley is usually described. In essence, Wesley argued that it was entirely within the minister's range of duty to resist spurious and unjust criticisms of the King and his ministers even though critics might cry out, "O, he is preaching politics.'" ¹ It is a frequent assumption that such an emphasis represents the boundaries of Wesley's political consciousness and discussion of political realities.

Central to this recurrent assumption is the designation of Wesley as a thorough-going Tory, conservative to the core, dedicated to the political status-quo. Unfortunately while this categorization of Wesley has been often expressed, the meaning of Wesley's "Tory" politics has been little understood and inadequate concepts have received continued expression. It is necessary indeed to question the adequacy of the rubric "Tory" as an umbrella to cover Wesley's political theories and practices.

In the works of three respected Methodist church historians assessments of Wesley's politics are expressed and the conclusions reached are in concord with the usual or traditional views indicated above. Frederick Norwood, Richard M. Cameron, and the late William Warren Sweet have given voice to this viewpoint.² Sweet's essay is a specific effort to spell out Wesley's Tory politics, while the others merely repeat the argument.

Sweet develops a thorough study of Wesley's politics, but makes several claims which do not, I wish to argue, rightly describe the Wesley of the American revolutionary period. Included in Sweet's theses are the following ideas: Wesley writes as a champion of order and the king; Wesley was a staunch Tory in politics as evinced by his High Church commitment; Wesley "certainly believed in the divine right of Kings"; he was always the consistent supporter of kingly authority; he believed in passive obedience and non-resistance, etc.

A re-examination of Wesley's political writings appears to chal-

¹ John Wesley, *Works XI* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958-59), pp. 154-155.

² See Frederick Norwood, *The Development of Modern Christianity* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 165; Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), pp. 42-46; William Warren Sweet, "John Wesley, Tory," *Methodist Quarterly Review* (1922), pp. 255-268.

lenge in varying degrees each one of Sweet's claims and to require fresh interpretation. In response to the five assertions, I set forth five counter theses: Wesley writes as the champion of liberty; Wesley was a Tory in the sense that he saw power originally derived from God, but he also recognized and supported the human delegation and regulation of that authority; Wesley's commitment to the limited monarchy which the Glorious Revolution brought must be seen as a precise opposition to the divine right argument; Wesley supported kingly authority which undergirded human rights, not all or any kingly authority; and finally, Wesley's powerful assertion of liberty of conscience undercut the old passive obedience and non-resistance appeals.³

G. M. Trevelyan has written that late Stuart-era Tories represented the conservative attachment to the monarchy while the Whigs were dedicated to guarantees of constitutional liberty. Tories were typically country squires, agrarian in orientation while Whigs were more the aggressive leaders in the urban economic and social spheres.⁴ If one may take Trevelyan's synopsis of both Tory and Whig views as sufficient, then the designation of Wesley as a Tory becomes problematic indeed. We may of course define it simply as one who in the American revolution supported continued allegiance to Great Britain.⁵

Wesley's own views on this issue should be taken most seriously. In 1785, Wesley responded to a charge by a certain Mr. Badcock against Wesley's oldest brother, Samuel. Defamed as a Jacobite (a supporter of the line of James II of England, who reigned from 1685-1688), John Wesley responded that most of those who called Samuel a Jacobite did not distinguish between a Jacobite and a Tory. A Tory is "one that believes God, not the people, to be the origin of all civil power."⁶

As Richard Cameron points out, the real issue becomes who are the holders of power or authority in the state?⁷ Wesley's answer to this is partially delineated in his tract, "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," published in 1772. While Wesley is concerned to reverse the question by asking the source of power, he does wrestle with the relationship between supreme authority and subordinate or derived power. His bias is clearly toward the

³ The final claim helps to create my belief that the famous Lord Dartmouth letter, written by Wesley on June 13, 1775, represents a vestigial viewpoint and not Wesley's real view at that time. Wesley, *Letters*, VI, pp. 155-164.

⁴ George M. Trevelyan, *England Under the Stuarts* (London: Methuen and Co., 1904), pp. 451-460.

⁵ As does Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language*.

⁶ *Works*, XIV, pp. 360-361.

⁷ Cameron, p. 44.

monarchy but his admission is quite clear. This supreme power, "the power over life and death, and consequently over our liberty and property, and all things of an inferior nature,"⁸ is often lodged in a monarchy, but at times is found in an aristocracy, and may even be held in a democracy. Wesley is concerned less with the holders of subordinate power than with the "grand question," "What is the origin of power?" Answering the question by reference to Scripture, Wesley declared God to be the source of power, not the people. Thus by *his own terms or definition, within the parameters* of this *particular* question, the issue of the source of power, Wesley was a Tory.

Now, however, it is imperative that we ask the question, "For what reason or reasons was Wesley asking this 'grand question'?" The full answer to this question seems to set the question of Wesley's "toryism" in a new perspective. This tract in fact presents a piece of a mosaic which must be set together in its totality in order to perceive the design or intent. Examination of Wesley's fourteen political tracts written from 1768 to 1782 demonstrates an attitude that is not characteristically Tory. These tracts show that Wesley debated the issue of the source of power not primarily to support the monarchy. The monarchy was the symbol of a higher value. He sought insistently to make clear his conviction that the real stake in the entire struggle was not monarchy, but liberty, civil and religious. Let no one underestimate Wesley's affection for the monarchy! Still, this was not the real issue in the revolutionary struggles of the three decades from 1768-1782. The issue was liberty. Wesley fought first for civil liberty (life, property, person), and religious liberty, the liberty "to choose our own religion, to worship God according to our own conscience . . ."⁹

In support of this argument, we set forth Wesley's ideas in his two tracts on liberty and "A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England," "A Calm Address to Our American Colonies," and to some extent in "Free Thoughts on Public Affairs."¹⁰ Here he makes clear his commitment to these treasured liberties, setting this dedication in the context of four related arguments which require attention.

First, there is significant evidence of a lack of appreciation for the monarchy in England prior to the Glorious Revolution. There is no support for the divine right monarchies of those earlier days of English life.

Wesley consistently compared the present and the past, always

⁸ *Works*, XI, pp. 46-47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36, 90-118, 129-139, 80-89, 24 respectively.

arguing that the watershed of English political development was the revolutionary settlement of 1688 and 1689.¹¹ The governments from the Conqueror to James II had perpetuated a tradition of injustice. Nothing could obscure the intolerable character of the Bishop's Courts, the Star Chamber, and other arbitrary exactions.¹² England had no claim to superiority above other nations in her treatment of those who deviated from official requirements of church and state. Specifically, there are pointed charges against the reigns of Mary, Elizabeth, James I, Charles II, and James II, that fines, imprisonments, burnings, hangings, and multiple kinds of persecution were employed to deprive men of liberty of conscience, of property, of person, and of life itself.¹³ In his important tract, "Thoughts Upon Liberty," written in 1772, Wesley's sarcastic criticism is penetrating:

Would one think it possible that the most sensible men in the world should say to their fellow-creatures, 'Either be of my religion, or . . . you and your wife and children shall starve; If that will not convince you, I will fetter your hands and feet, and throw you into a dungeon; And if still you will not see as I see, I will burn you alive!' ¹⁴

Secondly, there may be observed Wesley's rejection of the argument that English liberties were of ancient vintage. This declaration actually is the other side of the previous argument. Wesley was careful to contrast the liberties of his age with the oppressions of the past. At the same time, he saw a significant parallel between pre-1688 England and revolutionary America:

And do you not observe . . . the perfect liberty which we enjoy? Not indeed, derived from our forefathers, as some writers idly talk. No; our forefathers never enjoyed it, either before or after William the Conqueror, and least of all in the time of the Long Parliament, or under Oliver Cromwell. *They had then little more liberty, civil or religious, than is now enjoyed in the confederate provinces.* [my emphasis] Never talk of the liberty of our forefathers: English liberty commenced at the Revolution and how entire it is at this day! ¹⁵

Thirdly, there is clear rejection of the revolutionary elements in England whose radical actions were judged by Wesley to be supportive of anarchy, threatening to cut the jugular vein of liberty.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 40, 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29, 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137. From "A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England" (1777). See pp. 24 and 42.

In the specific context of his argument for civil and religious liberties, in the second tract on liberty, written in 1776, he declared that he was pleading the cause of his King and Country and of "every country under heaven where there is any regular government. I am pleading against those principles that naturally tend to anarchy and confusion; that directly tend to unhinge all government . . ." ¹⁶

A corollary of this argument is the conclusion of Wesley that the least liberty is found under a republican government. The central issue is liberty and the best means of its preservation. Wesley of course could not accept the people as the best stewards of authority, believing that republicanism was thoroughly capricious.

Fourth, there is Wesley's unbroken dedication to a limited monarchy as the most dependable guardian of the liberties of the people, liberties which were natural rights of every man, never to be tampered with or violated.¹⁷ At least in his later years Wesley had no commitment to a divine right monarchy.¹⁸ Authority having originated with God, it was now lodged in a monarch whose authority had been bounded by men. Wesley happily acknowledged the human exercise and distribution of power. His political ethic here is thoroughly pragmatic.

Finally, given the cumulative weight of the previous arguments, we argue again that Wesley's central commitment was not to his country, his king, or negatively, his distaste for republican governments, but his dedication to the full liberties of his land, liberties both in church and state, both personal and social. Wesley supported the aspirations of America until he concluded, wrongly, history suggests, that the revolution meant an erosion of those rights, gained after long centuries of travail which Englishmen enjoyed in his day. The possibility of such an erosion is not to be discounted, for the peril is ever present.

In view of these observations and the evidence set forth, it seems proper to argue:

1. Wesley was a Tory, in the sense that he believed power to originate with God. That power, however, is distributed among men and is restricted by men. Commitment to the limited monarchy clearly involves a recognition of this assertion. Tories of course accepted and supported the limited monarchy.

2. Wesley was very much like a Whig in his passionate avowal

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Earlier in his life he had such a loyalty, as the letter to Dartmouth makes clear.

of the immense benefits conferred upon every English citizen by the liberties won in the revolution of 1688.¹⁹

3. Liberty is the central commitment and the dominant note in Wesley's political ethics.

4. It is not too helpful to classify Wesley's political thought by categories like Tory. Rather it may be argued that he was both liberal and conservative in his political stance. He was liberal in that he espoused more than many contemporaries important human rights, rooting his liberalism in an ontology based upon natural law. The right of worship, including right of voluntary association (except for Roman Catholics), and private judgment, was an expression of these rights. The right of person, property, press, speech, and life, were civil rights which all men held from God. Here Wesley balanced freedom with order, recognizing the boundaries of the exercise of freedom. But Wesley was also conservative in his insistence upon the maintenance of these liberties against rebel encroachments. These values could be preserved best in the ordered context of a limited monarchy. So he fought for national backing for the King whose weaknesses were evident to Wesley, but whose strengths were superior to many princes in Europe.²⁰

A fair evaluation of Wesley's ethics seems to require the conclusion that, *given his assumptions and persuasions*, he was liberal, not reactionary, and that the radicals he criticized were potentially reactionary. From the vantage point of our historical position, some of Wesley's assumptions and beliefs are seen to be faulty, but his commitment to human liberty is a luminous and penetrating valuation of man.

A postscript is required. Wesley's liberalism was circumscribed by his fears of Roman Catholic political resurgence, so that specific practical expressions of liberty such as Catholic freedom of religious assembly, the education of clergy, and other rights were vigorously resisted. Greatly appreciative of Catholic piety he questioned potential changes in his nation's policies which would give undue encouragement to Catholics. For Wesley *de haeretico comburendo* was sordid note in English history and he wanted no returning to the bleakness of such human intolerance. Like Locke and Jeremy Taylor, Wesley distrusted Catholic political action, remaining in this a man of his times.

¹⁹ See Allen Cooper's broad yet judicious assertions concerning Wesley's smorgasbord of political tastes, in "John Wesley: A Study in Theology and Social Ethics." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia U. 1962, pp. 87-94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XI, p. 16.