ALBERT C. OUTLER AND
THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

TED A. CAMPBELL

(To the missing last page from article in the January, 2010, issue of Methodist History)

The Postmodern Condition. Perhaps Outler had a prescient vision of the eclipse of Modernist culture and the coming of postmodern interpretations of cultures. His researches certainly paved the way for the postmodern recovery of the Wesleyan tradition in the 1980s and beyond.

What enabled Albert Outler to make his contributions to the ecumenical movement and to the interpretation of the Wesleyan tradition was a clear and consistent sense, derived from his earlier studies of Clement and Origen, that the Christian Gospel is itself the principal meaning of “Tradition”—and this is indeed “Tradition” with a capital “T.” It was in this particular sense that Origen, writing from Alexandria in the early third century, claimed to have received the tradition from the apostles, the tradition on which Origen reflected throughout his treatise “On First Principles.”

This, I believe, is the richer meaning of “Tradition” that Outler had discovered in his patristic studies, that he had worked collaboratively to express with other Christians in his ecumenical work, that he had tried to bequeath to his own Methodist family by way of the section on “tradition” in the statement on “Our Theological Task.” It was the great gift of Albert C. Outler to see the heart of the Christian Tradition with great clarity. His patristic studies and ecumenical involvement provided an ideal environment for the cultivation of this vision. And his vision of the heart of the Christian tradition has proven to be renewing in the life of the churches. In the words of Outler’s friend and collaborator K. E. Skydsgaard, the Tradition as the Gospel itself is “The Flaming Center” of Christian faith.


31 Skydsgaard, op. cit.