

BOOK REVIEWS

Vicki Tolar Burton, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism: Reading, Writing, & Speaking to Believe*. Studies in Rhetoric and Religion 6. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008. 388 pp. \$44.95.

Responding to the call to “stand with women” at the 2003 conference held in Manchester, UK, to commemorate John Wesley’s 300th birthday, Vicki Tolar Burton (Oregon State University) argues that “John Wesley wanted to make ordinary Methodist men and women readers, writers, and public speakers because he understood the powerful role of language in spiritual formation” (1). By encouraging marginalized peoples such as women and the poor to keep journals, write letters and publish their personal testimonies to faith, Wesley validated the importance of the religious lives of ordinary people. Through close examination of primary sources, Tolar Burton offers a rich account of leading Methodist women such as Sarah Crosby, Mary Fletcher and Hester Ann Rogers, analyzing their journals to reveal how rhetorical and literacy practices shaped their religious experiences. Through these practices Wesley taught his followers to “read and interpret not only the Bible but also their own souls” (23).

Particularly noteworthy are Tolar Burton’s insights into aspects of Methodist Studies given little coverage elsewhere. For example, she gives readers a meticulous account of Samuel Wesley and Susanna Annesley Wesley in Chapter 2, “John Wesley’s Literacy Genealogy,” with glimpses of their personal lives that illuminate the household in which John and Charles grew up. In Chapter 3, “Writing to Believe,” Tolar Burton reviews John Wesley’s diary and journal as “a rhetorical gateway into the literacy events and practices that shaped his spiritual life and became tools of soul-making in early Methodism” (67). In Chapter 4, “Speaking to Believe,” she examines selected journals of Methodist preachers and analyzes Wesley’s method for training them. Some of Tolar Burton’s best work is found in Chapter 5, “Walking in Light, Walking in Darkness,” where she shows how women preachers employed strategies for their own empowerment in a culture that scorned them, and in a movement whose leaders silenced them after Wesley’s death. She proposes that “through literacy and rhetorical practices, early Methodist women exercised spiritual agency and authority during an age in which these things were scarce for women” (152). She also provides an in-depth discussion of the role of spiritual correspondence among the early Methodists, both from John Wesley’s perspective and among women. Tolar Burton’s astute historical analysis demonstrates convincingly that the women who “helped weave this web” of literary communication were “among the

most influential members of Wesley's movement" (181).

In Chapter 6, "The Mystic and the Methodists," Tolar Burton provides a close study of the life and writings of Hester Ann Rogers, especially the published edition of her journal. Through feminist analysis, Tolar Burton shows how the production authority of the Methodist publishing house re-voiced Rogers to suit the purposes of the male-dominated leadership that followed Wesley's death. Through a method Burton calls "rhetorical accretion," she argues effectively that "Having been fully made by God in the spirit, Hester Rogers was remade by each textual accretion until the published voices of the new speakers held rhetorical power equal to Hester's own voice" (229). In Chapter 7, "Reading to Believe," Tolar Burton exhaustively studies "John Wesley's sponsorship of literacy—especially reading—as revealed in the inventory taken of his press at the time of his death in 1791" (233). This inventory "provides a special opportunity to understand the literacy practices" of Wesley's followers, especially among the "poor and laboring classes" (244). Chapter 8, "Climbing Boys and Spinning Girls," examines the literacy practices of early Methodist Sunday schools and their impact on working-class children. In her conclusion, Tolar Burton observes that "By sponsoring reading, writing, and speaking as daily habits of the Christian life, Wesley taught the people called Methodists how to live differently" (297). Through these practices, ordinary people—especially women and the poor—were given agency to speak and to write about their religious experiences.

Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism provides a new hermeneutical lens through which to study Methodist history, acknowledging the central role of ordinary people—especially women and the poor. Tolar Burton recognizes the key role of John Wesley and other leaders yet rejects a Wesley-centered approach to historiography. She bids Mr. Wesley to step aside, allowing his followers to emerge from the shadows and stand with him in the spotlight of history. Immersed in archival research and informed by a rich knowledge of secondary sources, Tolar Burton confirms the explanatory power of this methodology through its prolific generation of original insight into several neglected corners of Methodist history. Historians of early Methodism should regard her study as essential reading.

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J. Gordon Melton, *A Will To Choose, The Origins of African American Methodism*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007. 317 pp. \$30.95.

I have often quoted the words attributed to theologian Karl Barth; "The Christian lives life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

These words have helped inform and shape my review of J. Gordon Melton's *A Will To Choose*. This book is a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the why and how African Americans were drawn to, helped shaped, and found meaning in American Methodism. As I have read this important history of African Americans in Methodism, what is to be found in newspapers that have shaped my reading and review of this book? First, we have read that the election of Barack Obama as the first USA President of African descent indicates that we are now in a post-racial time. My response: "Making racial history does not erase racial history." Second, Barack Obama's membership in Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a Church of the United Church of Christ, brought forth a deluge of critical responses that revealed limited public understanding of Black Church traditions in the pulpit and the pew, as well as little knowledge about the history and current reality of Blacks in predominantly white denominations. Third, most of us are still struggling with developing an appreciation of how Black history in church and society is intertwined with all history. J. Gordon Melton's book makes an important contribution toward our developing that appreciation in his 278 pages of text in *A Will To Choose*.

Melton's Introduction acknowledges the African past of African Americans by writing that a "complete discussion of African religion would take us far afield from the purposes of this text, but one element in African religions is important—the role of ancestors." Although *A Will To Choose* was not written to explore in depth the history and culture of the African continent, my hope is that today African American Methodists and those who are not will view Melton's book as a resource to get to know our American Black ancestors. Their involvement in early American Methodism has left a legacy for all of us. Regardless of who we are racially, they, with all of the Methodists of their era, are our ancestors.

Most of us know very little of the history of some of the Methodist Churches described in the book. I suggest reading the book will bring "life" to the history and existence of these denominations whose acronyms I list to stimulate your historical curiosity: AME, AMEZ, AUC, AUFMPC, CME, MEC, MECS, and MPC. One of the joys I experienced in reading *A Will To Choose* was having the history of denominations whom I knew only by their initials, come alive as I read about them.

Two brief sections in the book titled, "The Question of Ordination" and "Not Waiting for Ordination," provide a fascinating historical background for the twentieth-century Methodist struggles around the ordination of women as well as the election of women to the office of Bishop. The twentieth century saw the first elections of women as Bishops in both historically white and black Methodist denominations. The story of a woman known only as "Elizabeth" (1776-1866) captures the tenacity and perseverance of Black women and men born into slavery and passed on from owner to owner, often unable to read, not allowing any of this to restrain or restrict them from preaching in Methodist settings. Melton writes that when Elizabeth was "queried as to the authority for her assuming the role of preacher, she replied

that the Lord had ordained her, and thus she needed nothing else.”

Many non-scholars like myself are less than enthusiastic about Church History when it is written about life in the Church as though the Church was not influenced by or involved in the justice struggles of the moment; such is not the case of *A Will To Choose*. Among the persons whose names are well known that Melton mentions are Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Hiram Revels, (Black U.S. Senator from Mississippi during Reconstruction), Harriet Tubman, John Brown and Denmark Vesey. Important attention is given to the Underground Railroad and its importance in U.S. history and its relationship to Methodism. Melton, as he “tells the story” of the origins of African American Methodism, reminds the reader that there can be no authentic American History without it acknowledging and describing the presence and contributions of persons of African descent.

Melton, in the chapter entitled “The Push Into the South,” discusses “The Unique Way of African Methodism in Charleston.” He writes of Emmanuel Church in Charleston, which was destroyed by the authorities because it had within it free Blacks who by law were not allowed in the state. Morris Brown was the elder in charge of the church who had traveled to the north for ordination. Emmanuel Church members were involved with Denmark Vesey in “organizing what would have been the largest slave revolt in U.S. history.” Vesey and others were executed and Melton writes that the proceedings that followed “led to the execution of 35 people, of which 16 were members of the African Church. Morris Brown was arrested under the 1820 statute against free Blacks entering the city from out of the state . . . and given fifteen days to leave.”

I must admit that I have also been less than enthusiastic about genealogy, mine or the genealogy of others. However, my maternal grandmother, whom we called “Mama Irene,” was born in South Carolina. I faintly remember that she occasionally mentioned that Morris Brown, the second elected Bishop of the African Methodist Church (AME) was a great-great grandfather of hers. Thus, he was for me a “distant” grandfather. However as I read about Morris Brown in *A Will To Choose*, I developed an appreciation for my AME Bishop ancestor that I had not had before.

I believe that in reading Scripture and history, it is helpful to find something within that connects with you the reader. Reading about Morris Brown in *A Will To Choose* became my “personal connection.” Any reader who has an interest in the racial history of the United States in Church and Society will be enriched through a reading of *A Will To Choose*. Remembering the words of Karl Barth, holding this book in your hands will be much like holding both the Bible and an early newspaper. It is a “good read.”

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