

**MISSION OUTSIDE THE WALLS:
THE ALLIANCES OF METHODISM TO DEFEAT
THE OLD COLONIAL ORDER RELATED TO
CHURCH AND STATE IN ARGENTINA, 1880-1890¹**

DANIEL A. BRUNO

Although our church argues, like any other, that this universe should be the happy and blessed domain of our Lord Jesus Christ, and seeks this goal faithfully, it does not find incompatible, that its members might be associated with men of the world for the achievement of high aims and ideals.

—The Rev. Alberto Tallon, Buenos Aires, 1913

Introduction

What is the nature of the church's involvement in the world? Is there a mission beyond making disciples? These questions imply a theological affirmation which challenges traditional answers, especially those answers which focus on numerical growth, rather than on the faithfulness of the church's mission. The words of the epigraph come from a formative time in the history of the Argentine Methodist Church, when that church played an active role in a nation still "under construction." In that situation, Argentine Methodism did not find being associated with the "men of the world" to reform the Nation, incompatible with John Wesley's admonition for those of faith to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. All depended upon the goal they would pursue. The focus of this paper will be the public theology of Methodism at the end of the nineteenth century and the alliances forged with other groups "to achieve high aims and ideals." To this end, the alliances between Methodists and non-Christians were defined, not by purity of doctrine, nor by self-interest, but by their common interest in reforming the nation. The paper concludes with some comments on present-day Methodist mission and the terms through which it seeks to build its identity.

Historical Context

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the links between the state and the Catholic Church were critical. These bonds were a renewal of patronage—*Patronato Regio*—an institution originating in the Middle Ages

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which dispensed mutual benefits to Church and state.² During the conquest of the Americas, the Spanish Empire pressured the Church to forego some aspects of its power by sharing them with the monarchy. For example, the powers of creating and sustaining new dioceses, electing bishops, and erecting buildings. By doing so, the Church gained access throughout the new lands with the support of the temporal powers. In return, the monarchs were given ten percent of the Church's income. The temporal power acted, not simply to represent the Church, but in most cases, to replace it. Church and state, spiritual power and temporal power, were linked with and dependent upon each other. From 1810 to 1850, during Argentina's Revolution for Independence, the Church regained supremacy over the State, due to declining royal power (because of the Napoleonic presence) in Europe on one hand, and the as-yet unconsolidated power of the State in Argentina itself on the other. In Argentina, the Catholic Church's influence reached all aspects of public and private life, intolerant toward differences in doctrine, habits, traditions, and morality.

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly after the liberal revolutions in Europe in 1848, the Occidental world in general and the Rio de la Plata region in particular would be the setting for the awakening of the Romantic ideals of progressive liberalism—which, in just that moment, had become a valid political alternative, with many opportunities to gain access to government. In response, the Catholic Church returned to its conservative, counter-Reformation stance. Case in point: Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) re-energized the ideological battle against modernism with a frontal attack, issuing the Dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and Papal Infallibility (1870). In the meantime, the encyclical, *Quanta Cura* (“How Much Care?”), and its attachment, *Syllabus Errorum* (“Syllabus of Errors”), in 1864, became the greatest contemporary defense of the old order against the “errors of Modernism.”³

In Argentina, the liberal government reacted to the Church's influence with a decade-long secularization plan. In 1882, the National Pedagogical Congress decided to remove religious instruction from the country's public schools. In 1884, the Argentine government expelled the papal represen-

² The encyclical *Unam Sanctam* by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 can be considered the ultimate expression of theocracy, an extreme way to proclaim the concept of *plenitudo potestatis* (absoluteness of power of the church). The bull proclaimed: “Outside of the church there is no salvation nor remission of sins.” It also stated in a clear reference to temporal power that “Therefore, here is the unity and uniqueness of the church, there is *only one head* and one body, not two heads like a monster.” Temporal power should be subordinated to the spiritual power. The church was an all-encompassing reality which reached into every facet of life. The bull concludes by stating: “Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim and define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” The original text of the Bull is lost; the oldest text is to be found in the registers of Boniface VIII in the Vatican archives [“Reg. Vatic.,” L, fol. 387]; trans. from Catholic Online Catholic Encyclopedia, online, accessed 2. July 2014.

³ Jean Pierre Bastián, *Historia del Protestantismo en América Latina* (México: Ed. CUPSA, 1986), 140.

tative from the country. A further irritant to the Catholic Church was the government's initiating the invitation of Methodist teachers from the United States to work in women's schools in Buenos Aires and Rosario City. In 1888, while Juárez Celman was in office, the Law of Civil Matrimony was enacted. This law stipulated a prison term for clergy who celebrated weddings without the proper signature of a civil judge. The Law of Civil Matrimony had profound effect upon the ethos, sensibility, economic benefits, and prerogatives of the Catholic Church.⁴ During this same time, Methodism was one active force among many, seeking to break with the old colonial order through progressive means.

The Terms of the Alliance

The liberal block⁵ came out of several sectors of society: the government; the free-thinkers and intelligentsia of literary and scientific circles; and members of the secret societies of Freemasonry and *Carbonarios*.^{6,7} Methodists joined forces with these groups. They articulated a strategic alliance against what they called "Roman Obscurantism" and "Papism."⁸ The operational goal of this alliance was a clear separation between Church and state; Methodism's alliance with liberalism and Freemasonry was both a communion of ideas and a mutual benefit to their respective initiatives. From this alliance, Methodists, who had no roots in the country's institutions, were able to obtain official contracts and certain privileges that they would otherwise not have been able to gain, particularly in education. On the other side, liberals and Freemasons used Protestant zeal both to fight the

⁴ See Carlos Alberto Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A Critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America*, translated by Richard Young (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 125 ff.

⁵ Liberalism in Latin America, especially from 1900 on, never played the democratizing role that European liberalism did. While liberals in Europe could count on a strong economic base, coming from a powerful and growing industrialization which generated a vigorous middle class, in Latin America, in general, liberalism was a progressive force fighting against conservatism. But as liberals became an economically active part of society, they became allies of local conservative groups, who were linked to farm production, the core of the economic strength in Argentina and Uruguay at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Europe, for example, the liberals were nationalists, while in Latin America, liberals adopted foreign customs. By doing so, they left the patriotic national feelings to the ultra-conservatives, who converted in a fountain of xenophobic hatred. Thus, while European liberalism took root, thanks to its industrial development, Latin America's liberalism soon converted itself into a synonym for conservatism. The agricultural export project which came out of the 1880s condemned the nation to postpone industrialization, paradoxically denying, in practice, the democratizing principle of liberalism. Liberalism in Europe was revolutionary, but in Latin America, at the turn of the twentieth century, liberalism was the new face of conservatism.

⁶ *Carbonari* (Italian word, in English: "charcoal burners") was a secret society born in Italy around 1807, fighting the monarchy and power of the Church. See Iris Zavala, *Masones, Carbonarios y Comunes*, ED, Siglo xxi, Madrid, 1971.

⁷ Who, from 1870, as a consequence of the ultra-reactionary results of the First Vatican Council, started an active anti-clerical campaign in favor of liberty of thought and enlightenment.

⁸ The first historically-documented deal between Methodism and Freemasonry is dated at 1868, in Montevideo, Uruguay.

supremacy of the Catholic Church in the theological arena, and to broaden its bases by gaining new acolytes among Methodists.

Methodism's mission in Argentina has been strongly linked to Freemasonry, both by overt agreement and by the presence of Freemasonry within Methodism itself. During the eighteenth century, Freemasonry began to achieve some political objectives by staying out of the limelight.⁹ By the late nineteenth century in the Rio de la Plata region, Freemasonry's ideological battle centered in three areas: the separation of Church and State; the recognition of civil rights for those who did not profess the Catholic faith; and secular education. Interestingly, these programmatic aspirations resonated with Methodism. Within this context, the Masonic fraternity was important, not only for helping Methodism to become established in the Rio de la Plata region, but also in designing some of its policies, especially those matching the interests and goals of both institutions.

The first Methodist house of worship in Montevideo was provided by local Freemasons—a fact recalled some forty-five years later by the Rev. John F. Thomson.¹⁰ According to research done for this paper, the origin of the link between Argentine Methodism and Freemasonry goes back to the nineteenth century and the mighty Scottish Rite lodges in Delaware, Ohio.¹¹ An additional connection is that young Argentine Methodist theological students have been educated since Thomson's day (1860) at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. For a number of Methodist leaders in the Rio de la Plata area, the intellectual environment of this small Ohio city has helped to create their world-view.

The closeness between Methodism and Freemasonry, while in some aspects positive, could also lead to a blurring of boundaries, and thus to conflicting loyalties. By the end of the nineteenth century, public statements defending Freemasonry might also assert that

although many [Methodists] may be linked by more or less close ties the objectives of the two institutions are different, stating that while "Freemasonry contends with the church for reasons of political life of the people; Methodism is fighting to wrest souls from the darkness of error by making them see the truth and be saved."¹²

In order to justify the alliance, Methodist leaders pointed out that because Freemasonry was not a religion, there were no conflicts of loyalty, and both could work together and even share membership. So asserts the Rev. J. G. Froggat in this regard:

The fruits of Popery are deceit, laziness, and darkness; the fruits of Masonry are charity, light, and brotherhood. Masonry is not a religion, nor will it ever usurp the

⁹ See Emilio Corbiere, *La Masonería, Política y Sociedades Secretas en Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Ed. Sudamericana, 1998).

¹⁰ Juan F. Thomson, *Recuerdos, El Estandarte Evangélico*, año 1915: 270.

¹¹ Ohio was one of the states with the highest concentration of Masonic lodges of various rites. There remains the only one lodge called "John Wesley Wesleyan Council," which meets with Methodist ministers exclusively in the Ohio Conference.

¹² *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Diciembre 16, 1897: 3.

place of true religion, as it is revealed in the New Testament; but thousands of Christians more intelligent, noble, and generous are enrolled in its ranks.¹³

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* fiercely attacking socialism and Freemasonry. From the pulpit of the First Methodist Church in Buenos Aires, the Rev. J. F. Thomson went on the defensive, publicly confessing his membership in a Masonic lodge:

I do not know if my listeners have read the famous encyclical of the Pope about Freemasonry. I have rarely seen a piece of papal literature so rudely libelous and so obviously false. If I had my residence in Rome, I would try to bring the citizen Pecci [a.k.a. Leo XIII] in front of civil court as a vulgar slanderer. Because it is clear that what he said against Freemasonry, he said against every Mason. . . . Eighteen years ago, I became a Mason; and, since receiving the grade 18, I swear I have never found anything of what is referred to in this paragraph. Besides, I state that among the older respected ministers of the Gospel I have met in my life, many were Masons! . . . This encyclical is the most infamous I've ever seen printed.¹⁴

Methodists have woven a network of alliances, not only with liberals and Freemasons, but also, in more recent years, with socialists and even radicals, against various vices, such as alcohol and warfare; and in contemporary times, denouncing violations of human rights and opposing military dictatorship. In all of these alliances, Methodism did not play its part by pursuing abstract, passive ideals of common thought, but rather, by using strategic alliances to achieve common goals, as exemplified in this clear, pragmatic statement from 1913:

As an Argentine and a Christian, I get involved with all who seek freedom of conscience for humanity, equality before the law and its application, freeing the bonds between Church and State, and in addition to all that is good for humanity in general, or to particular individuals, without asking that person with whom I associate, what they think or do not think, but rather, what they seek.¹⁵

We could draw many conclusions from this interesting statement. Right now, we will only point out that the goals pursued by Methodism were considered a constitutive part of their evangelical mission, while for other groups with whom Methodists worked, their goals were simply part of a secular program. Methodism had to range widely, tolerating helpers in mission who did not speak in religious language—or even have faith.

Mission Outside the Walls

Methodism wanted simultaneously to save souls and to reform society. Souls would be saved by “snatching them from the darkness of error by making them see the truth.”¹⁶ The “darkness of error” was not a mystical reference to hell, but to the Catholic Church and its teachings. The anti-clerical missionary strategy of Methodism linked both issues: “Making the people

¹³ J. G. Froggat, *¿Será la masonería lo que el fraile romanista la pinta?* EEE. Agosto 4, 1892: 7.

¹⁴ J. F. Thomson, Sermon, Argentina Methodist Church General Archives.

¹⁵ *El Estandarte Evangélico*, 1913.

¹⁶ *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Diciembre 16, 1897: 3.

see the truth” was also “reforming society.”

In the process of seeking the truth and reforming society, Methodism stated publicly its support of the government, as long as government continued its secularization campaign:

As Evangelical Christians, a sacred duty [is] incumbent upon us: to do justice to governments that not only promote freedom of conscience, but also have the courage to turn away from the dangerous cliffs that can compromise honor, the future, and national dignity.¹⁷

While Methodism’s main goal was the separation of Church and state, a preliminary step was needed, i.e., the slow political process of approving laws that would ultimately lead to final separation. In fact, the final, total separation of Church and state would consume years of perseverance and effort—even today, that process has not been fully completed. It seemed prudent to begin with small, forward-leading laws. So, in the pages of *El Estandarte*, Methodism’s official newspaper, this statement appeared:

In the name of freedom of conscience, we believe that the declaration of the separation of Church and State would be at its most radical to cut abuse of clericalism and set modern society free from the regression that this union has condemned. . . . But for this measure to produce beneficial results, it must be preceded by others, as has been done in other countries. . . . To rid families of clerical influence, our government must establish mandatory civil marriage and civil status records. . . and to declare an end to ecclesiastical courts and their remaining, unnecessary jurisdiction.¹⁸

Methodism actively encouraged these laws. The pages of *El Estandarte* became a reflection of how Methodist leaders saw the most relevant contemporary issues: “Every Christian, every man who loves the liberties of his country, should cooperate with the efforts of a government which knows how to challenge the hidden powers that still mean to stifle the freedoms of the people in the name of God.”¹⁹

One of the first triumphs was the passage of a law for a lay, free, compulsory education of children from ages six to fourteen years, in 1882. This law broke the monopoly the Catholic Church had heretofore enjoyed in the provision of education.

Methodists’ joy in the enactment of this law was unconstrained, because it created new possibilities for educational endeavors:

Last Monday was a glorious day, when by a vote of 48 to 10, the secular education law (Law 1420) was approved. Thank God, the last obstacle in enacting the Law was surmounted on Thursday. . . . It was the triumph of progress, of liberalism, of democracy; it was the victory of freedom over the sophistry and absurdity of the Ultramontanists. . . . It is the victory of the gospel of freedom.²⁰

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church resisted the new legislation, claiming that

¹⁷ Declaración Pública, *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Diciembre 16, 1897:3.

¹⁸ La separación de la Iglesia del Estado, *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Junio 21, 1884: 1.

¹⁹ *El Estandarte*, Agosto 16, 1883: 2.

²⁰ “El triunfo seguro,” *El Estandarte Evangélico*, 28 Junio, 1884: 2.

it was “godless and atheistic” and its advocates “heretics.”²¹ The reaction of the Vatican, through the Papal Nuncio in Buenos Aires, was immediate and destructive, prompting President Avellaneda to dismiss the Nuncio—but vast sectors of the population opposed the action, and the Nuncio ultimately retained his office.

It was necessary to accelerate the adoption of the Civil Marriage Act, owing to the presence in Buenos Aires of large numbers of immigrants of various nationalities and faiths, who as non-Catholics would not be able to legalize their marriages. Methodism was a strong ally in educating the populace and promoting the Act. The editor of *El Estandarte* fervently proclaimed:

The mood of the masses is ready to introduce any improvement, in favor of the ideal to which they aspire: synthesized in the slogan “common law.” All citizens proclaim the necessity for civil Marriage; obscurants labor in vain, trying to shake the spirit of the masses in preparing for a relentless struggle, because the domain of consciousness begins where the domain of force ends.²²

Finally, the Civil Marriage Law was enacted in 1889. The Catholic *intelligentsia*, together with the bishops, threatened the populace by accusing the promoters of the law to be traitors, stating that “civil marriage is an opposition to the essential boundaries of national civilization.”²³ Such statements were recognized for what they were, namely, attempts by the Catholic Church to hold on to their now-eroding control of civic life.

By the end of the 1880s, the most important secular laws had been enacted, covering four stages of civic life: birth (Civil Status Records Law, 1885); education (Free, Lay, and Compulsory Education Law, 1882); marriage (Civil Marriage Law, 1889); and death (Secular Cemeteries Law, 1882). Methodism had actively promoted each of these laws.

Only one law, in spite of support by strong pressure from the church, had been defeated: the Divorce Law, presented several times between 1884 and 1902. In defense of this law, Methodism showed clearly the foundation of its public mission: “In the name of Christ, in the name of morality, in the name of many innocent and defenseless creatures, we ask absolute divorce, the possibility of absolute annulment of the marriage bond for good cause. . . .”²⁴ Clearly, the Methodist Church had adopted the divorce law campaign as its own. Although the law was defeated, Methodism was ready to maintain its convictions in the matter. At the Annual Conference of 1904, Methodism officially adopted this position with respect to divorce: “We believe that marriage is a divine institution. . . . We believe that mankind is of only one specie; these facts, together with experience, establish monogamy. . . . However, the abnormal conditions introduced by man admit the dissolution of marriage.”²⁵

All of the aforementioned public involvements of Methodism might seem

²¹ Emilio Corbiere, *La Masonería, Política y Sociedades Secretas en la Argentina* (Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1998): 252.

²² “Transcendent Momento,” in *El Estandarte Evangélico*, 31 de Mayo 1884: 1.

²³ José Manuel Estrada, quoted in Corbiere, Emilio, op. cit.: 246.

²⁴ *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Enero 18, 1883: 1.

²⁵ *Actas de la Conferencia Anual de Sudamérica, de la Iglesia Metodista Episcopal*, 1904: 67.

naive, as they surely are. However, the examples cited are tinged with the excitement of the moment and are part of the development of a constructive discursive process that shows an absolute openness of Methodism to burning contemporary issues. Nineteenth-century Methodism was involved in social and political issues. Methodists took the risk—as did John Wesley, a century earlier—of enabling the historical human situation to push the gospel, in order to extract new answers for new situations, without foreknowledge of where that process might lead. By doing this, Methodists met other men and women on the same road and associated with them in order to achieve high aims and ideals—clearly a challenge for today’s Methodists.

Concluding Thoughts

We could consider the events described in this paper to be merely anecdotal, part of an interesting story to be contemplated from a distance. However, the moral evangelical commitment to be in the trenches of history, where burning issues are played out and the destiny of a nation is being forged, is a paradigm for mission to which Methodism must turn and return in every stage of its journey in faith. Perhaps this paradigm is the clearest “mark” of Methodism’s mission, right from Wesley’s time, i.e., going out into the world as its parish, shaking hands with those encountered along the way, walking with others no matter what they might think, but looking purposefully at where they want to go. This is a difficult challenge, a historically troublesome imperative for contemporary Methodist mission. The medieval world-view of the Catholic Church in the New World was an all-encompassing cultural imperialism; indeed, Methodism fought against this imperialism in the name of a gospel of freedom and democracy, with ideas, arguments, actions, and alliances. Argentine Methodism could cohere, under a common interpretation of the situation, allowing them to grasp the whole picture in order to deconstruct it to find issues which with they could work. The Catholic imperialism of colonial culture was a hugely complicated entanglement of issues which had to be unraveled, particularly with respect to the relationship between Church and State.

The public role Methodist leaders took was not simply a hobby, but lay at the very core of their conception of mission and evangelism. Methodists did not divide mission into its spiritual and social components, nor did they seek to increase numerical membership at any cost; rather, they sought to be faithful to the moral commitment to the Kingdom of God and its justice. Today, 120 years after these events, Methodism’s missional conception has been divided into artificial dichotomies which do not enable a holistic approach to the work remaining to be done. An example is as follows.

Identity or Relevance: a False Dilemma

Mission, undertaken outside church walls, side-by-side with non-Christians, has been stigmatized as an approach imperiling Christian identity—as if the public arena were an alien environment for Christians. Jürgen Molt-

mann, in his seminal work, *The Crucified God*, outlines the dialectical tensions between identity and relevance in mission. I would call this a *false dilemma*, rather than a *dialectical tension*. Without going into the matter more than superficially, let me state that Moltmann's threatened identity is expressed just in terms of doctrine. Luther's formula, "*Crux probat omnia*," quoted by Moltmann, is a doctrinal starting-point.²⁶ For that reason, the dilemma it sustains, becomes irreducible. From this perspective, the relationship between the terms "identity" and "relevance" is inversely proportional: where one becomes stronger, the other must weaken.

Does it have to be this way? Methodist tradition says emphatically, No! If Christian identity is defined through its creeds and its teaching, it will be very difficult to entertain another possibility apart from the dialectical tension noted by Moltmann, characterized by opposites. The problem is that dilemma, expressed in this way, is encased in a narrow definition between "identity" in theoretical and doctrinal terms, and "relevance" in terms of alliances and historical practices. Worse, "identity" is posited as "at the inside" of the church, while "relevance" is set "outside" the church. This dichotomy does not allow for the possibility that the identity of the gospel might indeed be defined precisely by the commitment and ability to be "outside the walls"; exactly where *kairos* demands, right at the intersection of human dilemmas. Such is the identity of Methodism.

"Characteristic Attitudes," Rather Than "Distinctive Emphasis"

I would like to revisit the concept asserted several decades ago by John J. Vincent in his book *Christ and Methodism: Towards a New Christianity for a New Age*.²⁷ After discussing the theological contributions of Methodism, the author concludes that "characteristic attitudes" are fairer as an evaluative category than "distinctive emphasis"—particularly since Methodism's foundations are not creeds and confessions, but "faith working by love." The identity of Methodism is its relevance; the practical attitude defines its identity. Thus, the greater the relevance, the stronger the identity. Does this mean that there is no Methodist theology or doctrine? According to Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan Catholic theologian, writing in his book *Liberation Theology*, the historical commitment to "faith working by love" comes first, to be followed by theological reflection on that commitment.²⁸ The starting point should not be a theory, but historical practice—as John Wesley himself knew. Wesley's idea of "practical divinity" consists in, not pushing dogmas into everyday life, but in discovering God's actions in history: liberating the poor, inspiring abolitionists, and creating research in science, economics, and politics. Out of such inquiry, out of such characteristic

²⁶ "The cross proves everything," Jürgen Moltmann, *El Dios Crucificado*, Salamanca, ED, Sigueme.

²⁷ John J. Vincent, *Christ and Methodism: Towards a New Christianity for a New Age* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 49-50.

²⁸ Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberación de la Teología*, Ed. Sigueme, 1975.

attitudes, came Methodism's identity.

Today's Methodism is challenged, not by the historical *Patronage Regio*, but by the totalitarianism of global financial imperialism, which can impoverish millions of people with the click of a computer key. How should Methodism respond? What does "proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation" in the twenty-first century entail? Who will be the contemporary "man of the world" with whom Methodism should be associated "for the achievement of high aims and ideals?"