Early Methodist Missions and the Great European Migration

by Philip Wingeier-Rayo, Ph.D.

Paper for the 2014 European Missiological Conference

Hosted by the Nordic Institute for Missiology and Ecumenism (NIME)

Sofia Cultural Center

Helsinki, Finland

April 3-6, 2014

Abstract:

This paper posits that, rather than a great missionary strategy for growth, Methodism, and European Protestantism in general, expanded more due to British colonialism, military strength, economic growth and emigration than a proactive systematic missionary strategy. It argues that John Wesley, rather than a proponent of overseas missions, was actually skeptical of its probability of success, and therefore hesitant to send talented young preaches to the mission field. Rather it was soldiers, settlers, workers and uncommissioned missionaries who were often there early pioneers of international missions. These travelers were also participants in the Great European Migration and riding on the waves of colonialism. This isn’t to say that there weren’t also brave and persistent missionaries who sacrificed to carry the Gospel into the world. There certainly were. However the British military strength, colonialism and Great European Migration were the undercurrent for the growth of Methodism, and Protestantism in general, in the 18th and 19th centuries. Just as was the case for Methodist mission in the 18th century, so today should we pay greater attention to the impact of economic and geo-political policies that drive immigration and produce opportunities for mission in the 21st century.

Full Paper:

John Wesley lived his life during the 18th century at the height of British colonialism and expansionism. Although he was critical of British treatment of the colonial subjects in India, Africa and Native Americans, he and his movement was also a beneficiary of the tremendous economic growth generated by colonialism. In By the end of his life, there were 71,668 Methodists in England and 43,265 in the United States, and still others in Ireland, Scotland, Canada and the West Indies.1 There were 19 missionaries and 5,300 members on mission stations around the world.2 Today Methodism is present in 130 countries with over 36 million members and enjoys a proud history of world missions.3 However, this paper questions how many of these missions were intentional and were part of a pre-mediated mission strategy and how many were started by faithful emigrants carrying the seed of Methodism with them. How much was this growth due to Wesley’s mission and evangelism and how much was it due to

1 http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/john-wesley-1703-1791
2 Ibid.
3 Figures from the World Methodist Evangelism Institute website http://www.wmei.ws/jointministry.htm
the economic, military and geo-political expansion of the British Empire? This paper will posit that rather than having a systematic missionary strategy, Methodist missions rode the wave of 18th century British economic and colonial expansion—including the Great Migration.

In 1735 John Wesley received funds from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) to go to the colony of Georgia as a young idealistic missionary to evangelize the Native Americans. Initially believing that the Native Americans were eager to learn about Christianity like “little children,” Wesley referred to native peoples as “noble savages.” However, he quickly realized that the situation was much more complex. The Native Americans had already been in contact with Christianity—first through the Spanish and later with the English, which had already left a bad taste in their mouths. Therefore it became clear to Wesley that the greatest impediment to evangelizing Native Americans was the unchristian behavior of the Europeans themselves. After several frustrating experiences Wesley returned to England in 1737 and experienced his “heart-warming” experience at Aldersgate, which triggered his participation in the 18th century evangelical revival that birthed the Wesleyan movement.

While Wesley evangelized his countrymen with zeal, he rejected overseas mission efforts as poor stewardship of human and economic resources. However British colonialism, expansionism and emigration carried Irish, Scottish and Englishmen around the world, some of whom were Methodists. For example English plantation owner in Antigua, Nathaniel Gilbert, returned to England along with two women slaves and was converted to Methodism on January 15, 1759 shortly before returning to Antigua to establish the first Methodist society in the Western hemisphere. The following year Irish Methodist preacher Robert Strawbridge established the first Methodist society in Frederick County, Maryland. A group of 12 Irish Methodists left Limmerick and arrived in New York on August 10, 1760 and formed the first Methodist Society in America. Irish immigrants Barbara Heck and Methodist lay preacher Phillip Embury opened a Methodist society in a loft. Eventually this society built a meeting room on John Street that was the first Methodist preaching house in America. British soldier Henry Tice established the first Methodist Society in Spain in 1769. In 1810 Kitty Dorset, a black Christian slave, introduced Methodism into the island of Montserrat. All these efforts were done without the support of a missionary society and were not part of a pre-mediated missionary plan. When some of these societies grew and wrote to John Wesley requesting a missionary to support the efforts of the laity, he refused stating that he could not spare the human or economic resources. When presented with well-designed plans for foreign mission work by Thomas Coke, Wesley also refused stating the inhibitive costs.

While Wesley resisted sending overseas missionaries, British colonial expansion progressed rapidly as the population of the American colonies increased tenfold during the first 75 years of Wesley’s life to reach 2.5 million by 1775. Many lay people emigrated carrying their faith practices, however there was a shortage of clergy in America. The Church of England was equally slow in

---

4 https://archive.org/details/originofoldjohns00john
5 Thomas Coke, An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, 1786.
responding to the spiritual needs of the colonists and there were few ordained clergy to marry, bury, baptize and offer Holy Communion. Nevertheless Wesley was slow to send missionaries—even after receiving several requests from the colonists. During his sixth trip to America, George Whitefield wrote Wesley in 1767 to ask if there were any preachers who Wesley could send. Wesley responded that he did not have enough to supply the needs in England. Whitefield returned to England the following year and continued to lobby Wesley for the need to send preachers to America but Wesley was still resistant.

Wesley also received requests from other American Methodists. On April 4, 1768 Thomas Taylor, a member of the Methodist Society in New York, wrote and requested Wesley to send “a man of wisdom, sound faith, and a good disciplinarian” to encourage work in America. We even stated that the Methodists in New York could sell their coats and shirts to pay his way. Wesley laid this opportunity before the annual conference of 1768 and also included an appeal for help from Methodists in Maryland, but could not get any preachers to volunteer. The following year Wesley succumbed to send missionaries—two per year beginning with lay pastors Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore in 1769—until the revolutionary war began in 1773. Wesley was slow to react, due to his loyalty to the British crown and corresponding despondent view of the colonies. There also may have been some unresolved feelings of shame and failure from his early missionary experience in Georgia. Whatever the rationale, he resisted sending missionaries to the American colonies until his hand was forced.

One of the reasons Wesley gave against overseas missionary efforts was that he could not afford to lose his ordained priests. When Wesley finally succumbed to pressure to send missionaries in 1769, he sent all young lay pastors—two a year until 1773. In the summer of 1772 Captain Thomas Webb, who had been active in the Methodist Society in New York, and preached in the societies in Delaware and Philadelphia, traveled back to England to request more support. He spoke before the Methodist annual conference in Leeds and was instrumental in recruiting Methodist preachers, George Shadford and Thomas Rankin, to go to America. Resolved to the growth and strength of the American colonies, John Wesley wrote George Shadford shortly before departing for America in 1773 with a charge: “I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America. Publish your message in the open face of the sun, and do all the good you can. I am, dear George, yours affectionately, John Wesley.”

Of all the Methodist missionaries sent to America, Thomas Rankin was the only ordained priest and was named as superintendent of the Methodist work in America. Shortly after his arrival, he oversaw the first conference of American Methodism with ten preachers who served 1,160 members in five circuits. His stay, though, was a short one, as the revolutionary war broke out in 1775. Rankin, Shadford and all the Methodist missionaries who went to American—with the exception of Francis Asbury—returned to England during the war. In the midst of this conflict, Wesley’s British ethnocentrism and his antagonistic view of the American colonies became evident in his 1775 treatise: “A Calm Address to the American Colonies.” Wesley had decided that the colonists’ claims of “no

---

8 Heitzenrater, p.244.
9 Ibid, 258
taxation without representation” held no weight and that the revolution was led by a wealthy elite who were manipulating the war to be able to freely trade with other countries and not pay taxes to the crown. With this treatise Wesley placed himself clearly on the side of the crown and basically called the colonists greedy and challenged the democratic governance model as taking the authority away from God.

After the revolutionary war and the signing of the Peace of Paris, American independence was a reality. Another concern that Wesley was reacting to was the need for ordained clergy in America. This was very important because the Methodist lay preachers in American had banded together and threatened to ordain one another. Francis Asbury had written that thousands of children remained unbaptized in America and some members of Methodist societies had not taken Holy Communion in years. Wesley’s initial response was to request Bishop Lowth to ordain Methodist lay preachers, but he refused. As a last resort, Wesley gathered together fellow presbyters Thomas Coke and James Creighton on September 1, 1784 and they ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as deacons, and the following day as elders. Then they consecrated Thomas Coke as superintendent and sent all three men to America to officially start the Methodist Episcopal Church. This is part of a general reactive trend in Wesley to American independence, rather than a proactive mission strategy.

Thomas Coke followed Wesley’s orders and went to America to convene the Christmas Conference in December of 1784, which constituted the Methodist Episcopal Church. Coke also ordained Francis Asbury and the two became the first Methodist bishops of American Methodism. Unlike Wesley, Thomas Coke did have a passion and vision for overseas missions. So much so, that Coke could not stay put in America and traveled to promote other mission sites earning him the nickname: The Father of Methodist Missions. Coke made nine trips to America, four to the Caribbean and died on his way to begin Methodist mission work in Ceylon, India.

Coke asked Wesley about beginning mission work in Africa and India, but Wesley advised Coke to wait until America had been consolidated. Yet Coke persisted and in 1783 wrote and distributed the “Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens” probably without Wesley’s knowledge or consent. This was nine years before William Carey would write his “Enquiry.” The plan was signed by Coke and Thomas Parker and issued after New Years, perhaps in an attempt to by-pass annual conference. The first meeting was scheduled for January 27th, 1784 and Wesley’s name is not listed in the minutes as present. Sixty-six pounds were collected for missions, but the minutes do not specify how they were utilized. The plan was disbanded when Coke was sent to America later that autumn.

After being set apart, Coke understood his Episcopal authority to give him the right to ordain for missions. He was consistent with Wesley in the face of the “ordination is separation” controversy and only ordained when the missionary was leaving the country. On at least one occasion, when three

---

missionaries returned to England, Coke rescinded their right to administer the sacraments. In 1785 Coke sent Freeborn Garrettson to assist William Black in Nova Scotia.

Coke introduced more and more mission work into the conference, and Wesley, now in his 80s was still skeptical. Coke issued a report to the conference on the work in the W. Indies in 1787, and then traveled around England collecting money for missions. In 1788 Coke raised a fund for Wesley to send preachers to Newfoundland and appoint three new missionaries to support John Baxter who was already in the W. Indies: Benjamin Pearce, Matthew Lumb and Robert Gamble. Later missionaries were also approved from the British Isles. Although the monies were not coming from the conference budget, Wesley still complained: “I did not approve of Dr. Coke’s making collections either in yours or another circuit. I told him so, and I am not well pleased with his doing it. It was very ill done.” Not only was Coke steering financial resources toward foreign missions, but Wesley also complained about using human resources: “Ought we to suffer Dr. Coke to pick out one after another of the choicest of our young preachers?”

In 1790 the Methodist Conference in England showed signs of supporting missions and taking the burden off of Coke through the creation of a committee “for the management of our affairs in the W. Indies.” It is unclear if the committee ever met unless at the annual conference. Nevertheless Coke had won the battle of placing world missions on the table as a worthy cause. Although Wesley had an earlier bias against world missions, it would be mistaken to claim that he was against missions. His passion to “spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land,” allowed him to create an effective movement that was missional in its very nature.

After Wesley’s death Coke continued to travel and support world missions. In his book Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism, John Vickers calls Coke “the foreign minister of Methodism.” Even when his fundraising fell short of the needs for missions, Coke used up his wife’s estate and went into debt. In all Coke made 100 sea voyages including 27 trips between England and Ireland. He visited France and Holland once each, and made nine visits to America. He visited the West Indies six times and died in 1814 while in passage on his way to India with four other missionaries. During his travels to promote and supervise missions, Thomas Coke traveled more than 100,000 miles earning him the title: Father of Methodist Missions. Before he died, it was said of Coke that “If the Doctor were dead, and some person were to pronounce the words missions and missionaries in his ear, there might be some hope of his return to life.”

Coke’s vision was to establish a mission society to raise money to support the 42 missionaries serving around the world in 1813. However there were many other uncommissioned lay people who traveled around the world as soldiers, workers or emigrants. This became known as the Great European Migration between the 16th and 18th centuries. Europe had described itself as a Christian continent since the year 1500, and therefore when its people migrated they carried with them the Christian

14 Minutes, i, p.240 and p.256 of the W.H.S. proc. xxx, p.27.
15 Vickers, 218.
16 Ibid.
faith. Approximately 50-60 million Europeans emigrated around the world during the Great European Migration. Samuel Huntington, in his book *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of the World Order*, states that “the export of people was perhaps the single most important dimension of the rise of the West between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.” This massive flow of Europeans carrying with them their faith and culture pales in comparison with the paltry number of Protestant missionaries.

John Pritchard, in his book *Methodism and its Mission Societies, 1760-1900*, describes the growth of British Methodism around the world and how it was established in each country. He records in great detail the early Methodist mission efforts around the world including the roles of John Wesley, Thomas Coke, Jabez Bunting and other mission proponents. Beginning with the backdrop of 16th century Catholic and late 17th century-early 18th century German Pietist mission work, the book quickly focuses on the British context. The author describes the priority of the Society for the Promotion of the Gospel (SPG) to provide for the spiritual needs of the colonists before evangelizing native peoples. William Caray’s 1792 “Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens,” which led to the creation of the Baptist Missionary Society, and Thomas Coke’s apocalyptic urgency challenged this priority, however the tension between empire and mission to the indigenous remained for several decades—varying from country to country. The charter of the East India Company, for example, declared that nothing stand in the way of commercial interests, although it did provide chaplains for employees. The author does not enter into the postcolonial debate on the relationship between colonialism and missions, but acknowledges other recent sources that do. Rather the author attempts to preserve the Methodist missionary efforts.

In the first of a two-book series, Pritchard shares the stories of how Methodism arrived in Africa, Asia and Latin America by unplanned, spontaneous immigrants carrying the faith—as well as through the organization of mission societies. For example, Peter Jones was born in Canada as the son of a Welch surveyor and a Ojibway mother. He was converted at a camp meeting and then used his language skills to preach to the Ojibways and Mohawks. Most of his evangelistic efforts were motivated by a pure passion and calling, and only later in his life did he travel to England to raise money and received a £300 grant from the Wesley Methodist Mission Society. Similarly another self-appointed missionary, James Evans, felt the call to evangelize first nation Canadians and learned Cree. He traveled west to the base of Lake Winnipeg and transcribed the Cree language to form the basis for Bible translations.

With colonial expansion also came military deployment. Some of the military took their religious convictions with them and began Methodist societies. For example, Sergeant Henry Ince went to Gibraltar to participate in the Great Siege of 1779-83. In his free time he started the first Methodist Society in Gibraltar and wrote to John Wesley to tell him about it. Another soldier, Andrew Armour,

continued this mission work. When the governor threatened to ban this ministry, Armour argued that it was alright for soldiers to continue the society as long as they didn’t neglect their duties. Later Armour was transferred to Madras where he appears to have done more spontaneous mission work. He learned to speak Tamil and was licensed to preach in 1812 in Portuguese and Sinhalese. He was in Madras when the first missionaries arrived and helped them to find a house in Colombo. His name is listed in the Methodist Conference minutes in 1816 and 1817 as an “Assistant Missionary” and then he was ordained an Anglican priest in 1828.  

Similarly in South Africa, soldier George Middlemiss gathered together a society of 40 other soldiers among his regiment. When Middlemass was moved from Cape Town, Sergeant Kendrick continued and the group grew to 120 soldiers and several Africans. When he became concerned how long he would be stationed there he wrote to a friend in England:

Dear Sir, In the name of the Methodist Society at the Cape of Good Hope I request that my letter may be laid before Dr. Coke...that a Preacher may be sent to be stationed at the Cape, if he conceives that it is practicable, and that it will tend to the glory of God. You know, sir, that our stay at the Cape may be short, and that therefore there is more need for a prop for those who may be left behind. We are very weak and illiterate, and stand in need of every advice which we may receive from you, our brethren. I hope that the Society will take fresh courage from knowing that there are those in their Native country whose study it is to promote holiness in the hearts and lives of their fellow creatures in a remote land, who are not privileged as our brethren at home.

Kendrick died before he received a response, however the 1813 Conference did indeed appoint John McKenny as a missionary to Cape Town.

In some cases Methodist mission work began spontaneously by soldiers, other times by workers, and still other times by settlers. There were also commissioned missionaries who established Methodist societies. Pritchard concludes that: “that the story of Methodist mission (and in this the Methodist story is not unusual) is one of partnership: between ordained or officially commissioned missionaries and layfolk ‘gossiping the gospel’, between men and women, between expatriates and indigenous Christians.”

Regardless of whether missions were established by the intentional efforts of missionaries or by the spontaneous unplanned efforts of laity, these stories of soldiers starting Methodist societies exemplifies the connection between mission and colonialism was intertwined. The late Puertorican missiologist Orlando Costas observed the interconnection between the modern missionary movement and colonial expansion. He argued that Western missionaries carried the same ideals as colonial-mercantile-imperial enterprise, namely, progress, liberty and individualism. Costas argued that the modern missionary movement is a child of the free enterprise system, and served as an instrument of

---

21 Ibid, 44.
23 Pritchard, 43.
legitimization of the liberal project with symbols, doctrinal statements, and ecclesial practices. Mission societies, for example, started schools and religious education programs that instilled the values of personal honesty, hard work, temperance, moderation, respect for civil authorities, self-control, avoidance of vices and worldly pleasures.²⁴

In his book, *Savage Systems*, David Chidester argued that early Europeans observers who arrived in Africa did not believe that Africans had a religion, rather they had superstitions. Later after missionaries arrived, they observed that Africans did have a religion, however it was demonic. Moreover missionaries saw themselves, as Costas argued, as part of the colonial endeavor. Rev. John Phillip was sent by the London Missionary Society to Capetown in 1819 and saw his work as: “scattering the seeds of civilization, social order and happiness,” as well as “extending British interests, British influence, and British empire.”²⁵

Jean and John Comaroff took a more nuanced position on the relationship between colonialism and missions in their book: *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*. They posited that missionaries were motivated by many different factors—not all were trying to impose the European way of life. However they did carry with them, intentionally or unintentionally, their cultural baggage and unwittingly introduced the European values of commodification. Moreover the Comaroffs argued that the encounters between missionaries and native peoples was not just a one-sided transaction, rather that there was a give and take: “It is that the missionary encounter must be regarded as a two-sided historical process; as a dialectic that takes into account the social and cultural endowments of, and the consequences for, all the actors—missionaries no less than Africans.”²⁶

This point is continued and emphasized in Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed’s book, *A History of the Church in Africa*, who argue that most of the history books about Christianity in Africa are Eurocentric and do not include the agency of Africans who are pro-active at taking the gospel around the continent. The authors state that: "This book deals with the African response to the Christian message and with African initiatives in the conversion of the continent" (p. 100)²⁷ The does acknowledge the place and role of Western missionaries, as does Chidester and the Comaroff’s, however recovers the role of Africans as evangelists, church planters, prophets, martyrs, scholars, church leaders—in sum, as active protagonists rather than passive recipients of Western missionary efforts.

In conclusion, this paper posits that, rather than a great missionary strategy for growth, Methodism, and European Protestantism in general, expanded more because of British colonialism, military strength, economic growth and emigration than a proactive systematic missionary strategy. It

---

argues that John Wesley, rather than a proponent of overseas missions, was actually skeptical of its probability of success, and therefore hesitant to send talented young preaches to the mission field. Rather it was soldiers, settlers, workers and uncommissioned missionaries who were often there early pioneers of international missions. These travelers were also participants in the Great European Migration and riding on the waves of colonialism. Yes, there were valent missionaries who provided leadership and guidance to Methodist mission work around the world. However, as John Pritchard wrote: “Often, it was an indigenous person, a native of the region, returning home after travels (captured, enslaved, trading or adventuring) in the course of which he or she had been led to Christian belief. It might have been a soldier or sailor on a military expedition. It might have been a European merchant or settler. Consequently many a missionary found a company of believers waiting.”

Just as was the case for Methodist mission in the 18th century, so today should we pay greater attention to the impact of economic and geo-political policies that drive immigration and produce opportunities for mission in the 21st century.

**Works Cited Page**


Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent*, 1786.


---

28 Pritchard, p.43.


Websites


http://www.lewrockwell.com/2012/02/david-deming/the-noble-savage/

The Jewish Chronicle: http://www.thejc.com/blogpost/founder-methodism-the-jew-a-worm