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DODGING THE DOGMATISMS: METHODIST REFLECTIONS ON ABORTION

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In the widespread debates that preceded the 1996 legislation on abortion the Methodist Church of Southern Africa reviewed its thinking on the subject. Its official statement in 1995 acknowledges the complexity of the issue and the divergences of opinion within the church. It calls for a variety of sincerely held convictions on the matter to be respected, but states its basic belief in "the sacredness and value of human life". Yet its thinking is far from simple and moves between two poles. On one hand there is the (expected) conviction that "abortion at any stage of pregnancy is undesirable and not in harmony with the perfect will of God". On the other hand there is recognition of the particularities of social context and of "an imperfect world" in which abortion, sadly, becomes a permissible option. Considerations of pastoral care are then foregrounded.

The suggested way ahead for Methodist thinking on this and other moral questions sets out to avoid "four dogmatisms" – those relating to scripture, tradition, natural law and experience. In this delicate and complex task a return to the Wesleyan quadrilateral provides a nuanced and helpful ethical approach.

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The build-up to the dramatic change in South African abortion law in 1996 was the occasion for renewed thinking on the matter in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. More recently, the amendment to the law in August 2004, has again spurred the church into giving its attention to abortion.[1] This paper seeks to evaluate the current position of the Methodist Church on abortion and, in the course of such evaluation to consider the method followed by the church in making its moral judgements and recommendations. Finally, consideration will be given to some common pitfalls in Christian moral thinking, and ways in which a Methodist approach can avoid those pitfalls and arrive at constructive conclusions.

Ethics after the event

The pattern of ethical activity noted above may be observed to be reactive rather than proactive, for the state has taken the initiative and set the scene to which the church has then responded. Should this sequence be a source of worry for a Christian denomination

[1] One of the synods of the Methodist Church has asked, through the annual Conference, that the church's Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee prepare a statement that shows abortion to be "unequivocally against the will of God".

– that its moral thinking follows chronologically that of secular legislation? Should the church not be in advance of the rest of society where moral matters are concerned? Is it not desirable in the mind of the church that it should be giving a lead in matters of such serious moral import as abortion?

While it would be reassuring for Christians to know that they are setting the moral agenda for the world, it is usually the case that "the world sets the agenda for the church".[2] Some Christian people may be uncomfortable with this, and it would certainly be problematic if the reverse were never the case, for then the prophetic function of the church would be in question. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of unavoidability about the saying. For as long as it is "in the world" the church must surely be responsive to its context – after all, even the great Johannine claim that "the Word became flesh" indicates a divine initiative in response to the human situation.[3] In a sense the world wrote the agenda for the gospel and what followed was God's response.

To live as Christians in the world and to be present as the church in the world gives rise to the inevitability that Christian ethics must be responsive – even reactionary rather than proactive. Even the most *avant-garde* and visionary prophetic action must be in response to something that is happening in the world. It is in responding appropriately that there can be Christian responsibility and simultaneously clear and helpful guidance for the members of the church who, after all, must live in the world. It has been helpfully pointed out that responsibility can also be spelt "response-ability".

Therefore, it seems quite fitting that the church's focus on abortion should follow activity in parliament where legislation on the matter is being considered. Other recent issues have followed a similar pattern.[4] There is a sense in which all Christian doctrine and ethics follows this pattern of being reflection on experience and "after the event".

Moral decision making in the Methodist Church

It has been observed that the Methodist Church is "short on doctrine and long on organisation".[5] It is true that the flourishing of Methodism owes a lot to the way in which

[2] "The world sets the agenda for the church" was a slogan of ecumenical moral thought and action in the 1960s and 70s. This approach to Christian ethics was sternly challenged by Paul Ramsey in *Who Speaks For the Church?* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1967).
[3] John 1:14
[4] Precisely the same sequence of moral activity in the churches can be seen in the debate on same sex relations. A series of legal decisions arising out of the 1996 Constitution alerted the South African churches to the fact that changes were taking place in the legal status of same sex relationships. A flurry of ethical discussion and debate in the churches has followed. The 2003 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa authorised the dissemination of a document compiled by its Doctrine Ethics and Worship Committee entitled: *Christians and Same Sex Relationships: a Discussion Guide for Methodist People*. The moral temperature surrounding this issue in the churches has risen further with the Constitutional Court ruling late in 2005 in favour of same sex marriage. The South African Council of Churches organized a conference on this subject in February 2006.
[5] Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth Press, British Edition 1969), 1.

Wesley organised people into "class meetings" and arranged the finances of the movement around those small, intimate centres of intense Christian fellowship.[6] The "shortness" of doctrine is accurate only in the sense that Wesley left no corpus of theological writing as comprehensive as Luther's *Works* or as systematic as Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It would be mistaken, however, to imagine that Wesley did not have a developed theology. His carefully nuanced and focused thought is to be found, not in abstract formulations, but embedded in his *Forty-Four Sermons* and his *Notes on the New Testament*. Perhaps the main consideration that shaped the nature of Wesley's theological legacy, however, is the historical fact that he died (aged 88) while still a priest of the Church of England, and never intended to start a denomination separate from that church. He always envisaged Methodism as a renewal movement within the Anglican Church. Hence, as distinct from the case of Luther and Calvin, who each wrote constructive theological rationales for their emergent churches, Wesley saw no need to develop a systematic body of theological writing.[7]

Ethics in early Methodism followed a pattern and status similar to that of doctrine. The moral standards required of Methodists were closely linked to their experience of belonging to a class meeting. Very little was set down as lists of moral requirements. Nothing emerged either in Wesley's time or in the ensuing centuries that could even begin to be classified as canon law. Wesley's rules for class members were general and minimal: "do no harm; do good; and attend to all the ordinances of God". Far from moral laxness, however, the Methodist way of life carried a powerful moral impulse. That impulse drew its power from the distinctive teaching of Christian perfection.[8] This most characteristic teaching of Wesley was also his most controversial, and one that he found himself regularly having to explain and qualify. Wesleyan ethics, then, has its proper focus, not in some lists of rules, but in the growth of the Christian believer in holiness of life. This was the sanctifying work of God *in* us that followed the justifying work of God *for* us. Wesley believed and taught that this was a process by which the Holy Spirit could gradually transform the life of a Christian into the finished product that God desired. Ethics in such a process, then, was not so much a matter of the dutiful observance of prescribed rules, but the generation of a spirit and intention in all things to do will of a loving God.[9]

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[6] The Methodist class meeting consisted of twelve members, of whom one was a designated leader. Meetings took place each week, and members were asked about their spiritual state and were offered mutual prayer and support. Initially each member paid one penny per week and, in the currency of the day, that meant that each class meeting raised one shilling a week. This practice first arose as a device to pay for the building costs of a meeting room in Bristol, but it proved to be a highly effective structure in the development of the Methodist movement. Class leaders also met on a regular basis and became John Wesley's primary organizational channel for the administrative control of the movement.

[7] Probably the closest Wesley came to laying down any doctrinal basis of faith was his abridged version of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles.

[8] See Neville Richardson "Christian Perfection in an Imperfect World" in (eds.) P. Malinga and N. Richardson, *Rediscovering John Wesley's Theology for Africa*, (Pretoria, EMMU, 2005).

[9] In an insightful article, Tim Attwell points out that even the "rule book" of the Methodist Church, the *Laws and Discipline,* is properly understood in a context of grace and not of law; see Timothy B. Attwell,

Growth in holiness was by no means understood by Wesley as merely a private arrangement between the individual believer and God. He was adamant that "there is no holiness but social holiness".[10] Clearly any ethic that claims to be Wesleyan cannot be either a list of moral regulations, or the moral strivings of a lonely, even heroic individual. It is more an existential matter of living in a caring, responsive relationship with other people and God than a dutiful obedience to a set of rules.

It should now be clear that any expectation of a legalistic statement from the Methodist Church in the case of abortion would be misplaced. If neither absolute prohibition or permissive approval, what then does the Methodist Church of Southern Africa have to say about abortion?

The 1995 Conference statement on abortion[11]

The statement moves between two clear poles of thought. It begins by affirming "the sacredness and value of human life", and it expresses the belief "that abortion at any stage of pregnancy is undesirable and not in harmony with the perfect will of God".[12] If that was all that was said, it might be expected to result in a simple statement condemning abortion and disallowing it as an option for its members.

There is, however, another pole of thought, in which a window is opened up to contextual factors. A decisive moral consideration which operates as a counterweight to "the perfect will of God" is the acknowledgement that the moral context is that of an imperfect world. It is acknowledged that "in an imperfect world there are circumstances" in which key moral concerns are in tension with each other.[13]

> This creates a profound dilemma for those seeking to be faithful to God's will. Much as we might wish for a clear choice between right and wrong, there are times when we are obliged to decide between imperfect options, each less than the ideal good.[14]

"Grace and the Laws and Discipline: on the ethos and spirit of the Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa" in (eds) P. Malinga and N. Richardson, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa.*

[10] Wesley's understanding of the social nature of Christianity is perhaps most strongly expressed in the fourth of his twelve sermons *Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, where he says: "…Christianity is essentially a social religion…to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it…When I say this is a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society, - without living and conversing with other men." John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1944)

[11] See the *1995 Minutes of Conference* of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, 227-232. It is important to note the supreme authority and status of the Conference in the institutional structure of the Methodist Church: "Conference provides direction and inspiration for the Church and is the Church's supreme legislative body. Conference is the sole and final authority in respect of the doctrines of the Church and their interpretation." *The Laws and Discipline,* 9th edition, (The Methodist Publishing House, 1997), 64.

[12] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 227 and 230.

[13] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 230.

[14] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 230.

The non-legalistic nature of Methodist ethics is evident in the preamble in which any "absolutist judgement" is dismissed because it "tends to trivialise the profound ethical ambiguities involved".[15] Far from imposing some heteronomous ruling on the matter, the preamble closes by inviting the people themselves to seek God's guidance on the issue and "to weigh carefully" certain specified ethical, legal and pastoral considerations. This is clearly in line with Methodism's moral focus on the growth in moral character, maturity and holiness of each believer.

The ethical and legal section begins by pointing to the irreconcilable differences between two schools of thought which spring from different convictions about when human life starts. Those who believe human life begins at or soon after fertilisation are, naturally, concerned for the rights of the foetus and tend to be anti-abortion. Those who see personhood beginning only once the foetus can survive outside the womb are more inclined to favour the rights of the pregnant woman and to be open to the idea of abortion. The statement acknowledges that no direct guidance is forthcoming from Scripture to help decide which of these positions is "Biblically correct", and grants that there are sincere Christians are to be found on both sides of the debate.

The historical and social context is then introduced and its moral significance is indicated. While abortion has been legally practised in South Africa for many years, the [1975] law was very restrictive, allowing abortion only in certain cases, such as rape and incest, the likelihood of the child being born with a serious handicap, and a clear threat to the mental state of the mother. This restrictive legislation, in which the rights of the pregnant woman played little part, was not objected to by the Methodist Church. Those who sought a more liberal abortion law pointed to the thousands of illegal and dangerous abortions that took place each year. In the light of these contextual factors, as well as the absence of consensus, the statement claims that abortion, especially in the early weeks of pregnancy, is more a matter of conscience than of law. It therefore calls for a law that will protect the consciences of those on both sides of the debate. The law should concern itself with the conditions under which abortion may take place, as well as by whom. "Beyond that, it should be silent"[16] It is clear in the scope and purpose of these considerations that the church sees its moral reach as extending beyond the offering of guidance for its own constituency. Here is the church, probably in response to official invitations, intentionally seeking to influence national policy. This is in keeping with the role of Wesley and early Methodist leaders in their participation in social and political matters, most notably those affecting the looming issues of their day, such as poverty, the education of the masses, the gin trade, and slavery.

The ethical-legal section concludes with a reference to rights and also to the nature of society and the church. Christians are urged to "balance the rights of the foetus and the rights and responsibilities of the individuals concerned". The focus then turns to society and the church.

[15] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 227.
[16] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 228

> We must acknowledge that we have not built a truly caring society, where there is a responsible exercise of sexuality and a willingness to care for every child born. The problem is therefore as much one of societal guilt as any individual's dilemma.[17]

This social reference leads naturally to a section on pastoral considerations which clearly, in the eyes of the church, are of vital importance in its response to abortion. Given the trauma and the "pain-filled circumstances" accompanying unwanted pregnancy, "legalism and moralistic judgements are pastorally inappropriate". Instead, non-judgemental counselling is recommended. The aim of such counselling must be to assist the pregnant woman to make an informed choice and helping her to live with the consequences. The subsequent resolution adds that such counselling should take place "within the caring community of the church" and "should deal especially with guilt and forgiveness".[18]

The question of conscientious objection by medical personnel to participation in termination procedures is raised in the closing resolutions, which affirm "the right of any medical practitioner, nurse, or other health worker to refuse, on grounds of conscience, to perform or assist in any abortion".[19] This comes to the fore once again in the 2004 Amendment which does not provide for the right of medical staff to refuse to participate in terminations. It must be pointed out, however, that staff are not compelled to undergo the prescribed training and this, in effect, entrenches the right of medical personnel to refuse. Vigilance will have to be exercised to ensure that those who choose not to undergo the prescribed training are not thereby disadvantaged or prejudiced in any way in such matters as employment and promotion.

Consultation between all "affected parties" is recommended, although the final decision whether or not to abort must lie with the woman. The exception here is in the case of minors (under the age of 16 years) where it is seen as appropriate that parental permission be obtained "unless there are overwhelming reasons why this is not possible".[20]

The final pastoral consideration urges that medical personnel should not be coerced into performing or assisting in abortions and should have the right to refuse to do so.[21] In similar vein, it urges that members of parliament who will vote on the bill be permitted by their parties to vote according to their conscience and free from any party whip.

In summary, it may be said that the 1995 statement, which remains the Methodist Church's official stance on abortion, is primarily a pastoral document. It is informed by its context, and concerned for the people – both inside and outside the membership of the church. As moral guidance for its own people it manages very well to encompass the complexity of the issue and to avoid legalism and dogmatism, and it states very clearly

[17] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 229.
[18] *1995 Minutes of Conference* 231.
[19] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 232.
[20] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 231.
[21] This issue also looms large in the church's concern about the 2004 amendment with its extension of authority to perform abortions to a wider range of medical personnel.

what it sees as "the perfect will of God" as the supreme reference point. In developing its thinking on abortion, how shall the Methodist Church proceed?

Moral guidance between the dogmatisms

Much Christian thinking on moral issues, especially in the quest for clarity, authority, and even certainty, is prone to fall into legalism and dogmatism. This legalism and dogmatism springs from three main sources – Biblical literalism, a form of Natural Law, and human experience as a closed empirical phenomenon. Wesleyan thinking refers to all of these sources of moral knowledge, but strives to keep them in tension with each other, and with each source informing the others. This method is widely known as "the Wesleyan Quadrilateral". Skilful use of the quadrilateral provides a way forward for developing theologically sound, well reasoned and sensitive moral thinking. Each element of the quadrilateral, however, taken by itself, or given too much weight produces a dogmatism.

Scripture[22]

For Methodists, scripture is regarded as pre-eminent among the four reference points of the quadrilateral – scripture is "the supreme rule of faith and practice".[23] This is not surprising among Protestants. Unfortunately, among Protestants, with their high regard for scripture, goes a strong tendency to regard scripture as the only reference point and source of authority. This results in the dogmatism of Biblical literalism in which verses, often wholly out of context, are sought to bolster views already held. It must be recognised, however, that the term "supreme rule" is not the same as "sole rule". Moral guidance must be sought in reference to all four elements of the quadrilateral. When this is observed it is a sure hedge against scriptural dogmatism.

Christian approaches must, of course, seek Biblical guidelines for their views on abortion, as they do on all moral issues. It cannot be denied that the Bible places an extremely high value on human life, but literalists go beyond this and scour the Bible for specific texts relating to abortion. There are none. The 1995 Methodist statement is correct in speaking of "the absence of direct Scriptural guidance on this issue".[24] Notwithstanding this absence, it is almost standard for certain forms of Christian ethics to appeal to selected Biblical texts to support their opposition to abortion.

The two texts most commonly referred to in this regard are the following:

[22] All scripture references, except for those used in other sources, are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990)
[23] *The Laws and Discipline,* 9th edition, (The Methodist Publishing House, 1997), 2.
[24] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 227.

> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (Psalm 139:13-16)
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> Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

These are powerful and evocative texts, especially within the context of the Judaeo-Christian faith. They are particularly appealing to theologies inclined towards predestination, for they speak of God setting down the lines for people's lives prior to any agency of their own, before they are born or, in the case of Jeremiah, even before conception!

Reflection on these texts, however, raises two unavoidable observations. First, they are expressions of faith and not of fact. It seemed to the Psalmist and to Jeremiah that God must have had dealings with them prior to their birth. Certainly, in the case of Jeremiah, his prophetic activities were so extreme and dangerous, that it is easy to see that he needed a faith in his calling that was unshakeable. This statement of being predestined to his prophetic work gives expression to such a psychologically unshakeable foundation.

Secondly, they are the language of metaphor. While certain uses of the Bible tend to take literally everything that is said, there can be no denying that much Biblical language is not intended to be taken literally. For instance, no-one takes Jeremiah literally when he speaks of the call of God being "something like a burning fire shut up in my bones" (Jeremiah 20: 9), or when he wishes: "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears" (9:1). Most dramatically in the context of the abortion debate, no-one seems to notice that Jeremiah could be taken as wishing for his own abortion.

> Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!
>
> Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son," `making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave…" (Jeremiah 20: 14-17)

In spite of, and in the face of, such observations about the insurmountable problems that Biblical literalism gives rise to, literalists continue to pursue their method blindly. Clearly this cannot be the method.followed by Methodists in questions of faith and practice. For all Wesley's insistence in the supremacy of scripture, he clearly did not intend scripture to be our sole and exclusive guide.

The 1995 Methodist statement itself admirably attempts to draw on scripture, but without convincing results. Its reference to John 10:10 is singularly unhelpful in respect of

abortion – that we "may have life, and may have it in all its fullness"[25]. First, the text may be taken to refer both to the emerging life of the unborn child and to the ongoing life of the mother, thereby being of no help in any attempt to decide between the two, or to prioritise one above the other. Secondly, the kind of life referred to in the teaching of the Fourth Gospel is not biological life (*bios*), but theological life – life in relationship with God. Greek has two words for "life" and the word used here is *zoe,* not *bios*. The writer is speaking of his central theme, the particular quality of life that God gives to those who have faith in Jesus.

Tradition

Ever since the days of its founder, Methodism has claimed to stand within historic, mainstream Christianity.

> The Methodist Church throughout the world confesses the Headship of our Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledges the Divine revelation recorded in Holy Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and practice, rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic Faith, and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic Creeds and of the Protestant Reformation.[26]

There can be no doubting that the founding intention of Methodism is not to change, but to be faithful to mainstream Christian tradition. Wesley reinforces this in his requirements for preachers and leaders as set out in his Rules of a Helper: "…do not mend our Rules, but keep them, and that for conscience' sake."[27] The nature of Methodism therefore, is not to be revolutionary, iconoclastic, or even novel, but to be faithful to the vocation and intentions of John Wesley which, in turn, seek to give full expression to the mainstream, historic Christian faith.

It is not difficult to understand from the above description of Methodism's profound commitment to historic Christian fundamentals that tradition looms large in the collective psyche of Methodism. The second element of the Wesleyan quadrilateral is tradition and, as in the case of the scriptural element, tradition could easily become the dominant reference point in moral decision making. A consideration of abortion in a traditionalist mode of thought could yield only one outcome – the wholesale rejection of the practice. A proper use of the quadrilateral, however, brings other factors into consideration. Rigid traditionalism, a simple repetition of the past, is set aside by taking into account the observations and learnings of the present social context. This usually has the effect of modifying, changing, or even contradicting past practices, yet still honouring the past and being faithful to one's heritage – thereby giving expression to an ongoing living tradition. Such multi-faceted thinking is evident in the 1995 statement on abortion, as shown above.

Reason

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[25] *1995 Minutes of Conference*, 169.
[26] *The Laws and Discipline,* 9th edition, (The Methodist Publishing House, 1997), 2.
[27] "Twelve rules of a helper" in *The Laws and Discipline,* 9th edition, (The Methodist Publishing House, 1997), Appendix 3, 243.

While reason is a common human facility, the activity of reasoning is not monolithic. As Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, there are many varieties of reasoning and to overlook this leads to great confusion.[28] A particular line of moral reasoning that has had, and continues to have, enormous influence in Christian moral thinking is Natural Law. While it would be naïve to assume that Natural Law itself is simple and that it yields only one answer to each moral question, it does speak with some unanimity on matters of human sexuality. Based firmly on an anthropology that foregrounds the human reasoning ability, it proceeds on the basis that all things have their intended purpose or "true end". Only actions in keeping with that true end are moral. In the case of human sexuality, the true end, according to reason, can only be procreation. Therefore any sexual activity not in keeping with this true end is against the Natural Law of sexuality and therefore immoral.

It is clear that those who subscribe to this way of thinking cannot countenance any form of birth control. And to this form of thinking, the intentional termination of pregnancy simply cannot be considered. Abortion is anathema – not only does it transgress the Natural Law of sexuality, but it destroys the natural progression of a new human life towards its True End as intended by the Creator.

Natural Law reasoning is highly influential in the abortion debate, not least by providing conceptual reinforcement for the prolife position. Unfortunately, it has the tendency to become an all-encompassing ideology that is blind to any other view than its own. The recent heated debates over the use of condoms as a precaution against the spread of HIV/AIDS is an example of the inability of Natural Law ideology to see beyond the strictures of its own tight logic. No amount of argument, no appeal to horrific statistics, can shake its simple conclusions. It is this rigidity that has led critics even from within the Natural Law fold to plead for more flexible forms of moral reasoning, forms that allow for human experience and contextual considerations to play a part. Charles Curran, for instance, has argued for moral theology, especially the official positions of the Roman Catholic Church, to become less physicalist and mechanical, and to be more "relational and responsible" thereby bringing human emotions and commitments into the moral equation.[29]

Experience

The experience of persons and communities undoubtedly has a decisive shaping effect on the way they approach moral questions and manner in which they do their moral reasoning. This insight lies behind Alasdair MacIntyre's argument for the multiplicity of moral reasoning as cited above.

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[28] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth & Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988)
[29] Charles E. Curran, *Moral Theology: a Continuing Journey*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982)

When John Wesley included experience in his quadrilateral, it is unlikely that he meant precisely the same thing as MacIntyre. Foremost in Wesley's mind was the spiritual experience that comes to a believer who accepts the saving grace of God. It is this particular experience that alone can shape the life of holiness and the development the Christian towards Christian perfection. However, experience cannot be limited to some imaginary spiritual sphere. Life is not lived in watertight compartments. Wesley was aware of this. When people come to Christ they do not lose their personal history and identity, however much there may and should be evident change in their lives.

Situation Ethics is a form of moral reasoning that foregrounds human experience. While Joseph Fletcher wants Christian ethics to be ruled by "love, nothing else", he has great difficulty in specifying precisely what this love is, even though he understands it as the *agape* love of the New Testament. He explains that this love is not emotional or exclusive, and defines it as "goodwill working in partnership with reason." This is a persuasive ethic, especially in these days of rapid social and behavioural change, but it does focus to such an extent on human experience that it is difficult to see how clear moral guidance is at work. We see here the dogmatism of experience. Each moral situation is regarded as unique, therefore one situation cannot really provide moral learning for another. Scripture and tradition may be referred to but are not regarded as decisive sources of moral guidance. The only decisive consideration is that whatever decision is taken yields the "most loving" outcome for those concerned. Abortion then becomes a ready option for those experiencing unwanted pregnancy. The 1996 South African legislation gives wholehearted expression to this way of thinking with its emphasis on the choice of the pregnant woman not to procure an abortion, but for "termination of pregnancy". Her experience is clearly at the heart of such an approach.

The 1995 Methodist statement shows the influence of this "experiential" thinking in its acknowledgement that we live "in an imperfect world" and in its emphasis on the pastoral care of those most affected by the experience of abortion. What is missing is an element of criticality concerning this "experience". For it seems that human sexual mores and practice are accepted without question. Without wishing for a moment to deny sympathy to victims of rape and incest, one would expect a full Christian consideration of abortion to take account of what has become of sexual experience in our communities, and to issue loud and clear criticism in terms of the other major moral sources – scripture, tradition and reason.

The way ahead

Methodist teaching on abortion, should always check itself against the Wesleyan quadrilateral. To be informed by the four elements, and for that information to be interactive, is a sure hedge against legalism and a way past the pitfalls of dogmatism. That this approach is complex is self-evident, but such is the nature of moral reasoning if it is to be true both to our deepest convictions and to the intricacies of our experience and our social context. Warning lights should start to flash when too much emphasis is given to one of the four elements.

As pointed out above, the present teaching of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa as presented in the 1995 Conference statement on abortion, is to be commended on its recognition of the complexity of the problem, and that absolutist views on the matter are therefore inappropriate. It is correct to acknowledge that opposite views on the question are held by sincere Christians. It is also to be commended for its strongly pastoral approach, for this is more than merely an expression of sympathy and pragmatism – it is a witness to the essential nature of the church that finds itself in a context of human suffering. It is also understandable that it gives tacit approval to the liberalising of the abortion law given the experience of so many women in South Africa. That context is well described by Dot Cleminshaw prior to the emergence of the new law.

> [T]heology on abortion in South Africa must face the reality of women struggling with poverty, hunger, unemployment, crime, violence, disease and breakdown of family life, not to mention male domination.[30]

The insistence of the 1995 statement that the final decision regarding abortion must lie with the pregnant woman, is clearly in keeping with this statement, and must be upheld in any future deliberations.

That it seeks to provide guidance for law makers is also commendable. This is indicative of a church that is aware of its place in the body politic, and of its collective responsibility to provide moral guidance for society as a whole and not only for individual Christians. Such a contribution is especially important when one remembers that many of the lawmakers are themselves Christian and seek the guidance of their churches for their decisions and actions. An official Methodist response is yet to be made to the 2004 amendment, which sets out to make abortion even more accessible in two ways. First, it further devolves the delegating power for authorizations, in terms of personnel and facilities, from the Minister of Health to the provincial health MECs. Second, it provides for registered nurses who have had the required training to perform abortions where previously this was open only to registered midwives.[31] An appropriate response would be to re-emphasise the 1995 concern, noted earlier, regarding the right of medical staff to refuse on grounds of conscience.

We have also noted shortcomings in the Methodist statement. Its biblical allusions are inadequate. While it is correct to note "the absence of direct Scriptural guidance" relating to abortion, there is much indirect guidance to be found. For instance, it is impossible to imagine that a creator God, who instructs his creatures to "be fruitful and multiply" and who looks approvingly on his creation (Genesis 1: 28-31) should happily approve of the termination of new (or potential) human lives. The same general principle, however, applies to many more moral issues – war, murder, capital punishment and violence of all kinds. For Christians therefore, it seems that the burden of proof must

[30] Dot Cleminshaw, "Abortion", in (eds C. Villa-Vicencio & J. De Gruchy) *Doing Ethics in Context: South African Perspectives*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis & Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), 170.
[31] *Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Amendment Bill*, Republic of South Africa, (B 72B – 2003).

always lie with those who are advocating abortion. Recent studies in the ethical significance of the Bible, however, have pointed out the insurmountable problems arising from the use of the Bible as a rule book. Instead they urge that the constructive moral effect of the Bible lies not so much in the direct, objective rules and regulations it may contain (which, of course it does), but in its shaping effect upon the lives of those for whom it is authoritative.[32]

This reference to the lives of believers brings us back to a vital point made earlier in the section on "Moral decision making in the Methodist Church" – that of the distinctive Wesleyan emphasis on holiness. While it has been acknowledged that Christian ethics should be aware of its responsibility to society and the body politic as a whole, it must also be acknowledged that Christian ethics is primarily for the guidance of Christian believers. Methodist ethics is primarily for Methodist people who, by definition, claim salvation in Christ, and who intentionally seek the life of holiness. For them scripture is authoritative, whereas for non-Christians there may be an awareness, even a respect for, the Bible, but it holds no authority in their lives.

Wrestling with ethical questions like abortion has a real and vital place in the lives of those seeking Christian perfection. Growth in holiness, however, is not well served by the adherence to dogmatism of any kind. Rather an open and free consideration of all relevant factors, guided by reference to the Wesleyan quadrilateral, provides fertile ground for moral maturity and growth in holiness. Such an approach gives rise to sharpened moral faculties, and the kind of courageous criticality pointed to above in the need for critical awareness of what has become of human sexuality in recent decades. Any development of Methodist thinking on abortion must take full cognizance of these important considerations.

[32] Barnabas Lindars, "The Bible and Christian ethics" in (ed.) G.R. Dunstan, *Duty and Discernment*, (London: SCM, 1975), 64-75; Elna Mouton, "The (trans)formative potential of the Bible as resource for Christian ethos and ethics," *Scriptura* 62, (1997:3), 245-257.