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Methodism and American empire reflections on decolonizing the church

Whither Global Methodism?

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The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.
The 'global' notion allows us to think that we can aim to control globality.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

When one opens the website of the recently-launched Global Methodist Church, one finds the image of a spinning globe. "The Methodist movement has always been global," reads the website. A global disposition is indisputably present in Methodism, a movement that emerged under the expansionist drive of the British Empire and exploded onto a global stage as the United States consolidated its westward and overseas expansion in the nineteenth century. But the globe to which Methodism was sent has not always been the spinning globe viewed from the atmosphere. That globe exists only on our computers. It is in fact a creation of the age of computerized globalization. As postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak suggests, there has always been a subtle link between the figure of the globe and the impetus to control.[1] Mapping the globe, scanning its surface, hovering over its atmosphere, flying across it—these are activities that disclose the globe as a manageable entity. Like the spinning globe, these are familiar images. We know what the globe is and therefore we assume what a global denomination ought to look like. Global has become a "fully appropriate" name.[2] This is the double-bind of a denomination with global aspirations: it presents its field of action as a fully known entity, the globe, while having to shape relations and assemblages in spheres that operate under the radar, on the ground, on the dusty paths unrecognizable to the satellites capturing the globe from above. The spinning globe is a representation of a familiar totality, fully known to us. Can it become an assembly?

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Planetarity' (Box 4, WELT)," *Paragraph (Modern Critical Theory Group)* 38, no. 2 (2015): 291, https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2015.0166.
[2] Global Methodist Church, "Vision," accessed September 28, 2022, https://globalmethodist.org/about/#about-vision-section

The Global Methodist Church, launched in May 2022, departs from United Methodism while sharing the hopes of being a global denomination. The departure will allow traditional and conservative Methodists to be in a denomination of likeminded theological spirits and a shared sexual ethic that portrays queer love as contrary to Christian teaching. The new denomination is making headways to incorporate congregations from The United Methodist Church as well as driving its own church-planting initiative. With its official and ancillary documents, the new denomination emphasizes its global character.[3] Its website states: "We are a global church that recognizes and deploys the gifts and contributions of each part of the church, working as partners in the gospel with equal voice and leadership."[4] The statement echoes Global Methodism's *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*: "Ours is a global church that recognizes the gifts and contributions of each part of our communion in Christ… Learning from each other and sharing best practices across cultures, we follow the admonition of St. Paul that 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good,' that together we are the Body of Christ, sharing in 'an equal concern for one another' (1 Corinthians 12). Our vision of a global church is one marked by mutual love, concern, sharing, and accountability"[5] (TBDD ¶302).

In this essay, I argue that the vision of the "globe" that is now stamped as the name of Global Methodism unwittingly carries with it the "spirit of empire," the thought that the globe is that which one might be able to manage and control.[6] The reference to "best practices across

[3] For a summary of the arguments made by conservative United Methodists and members of the Wesleyan Covenant Association prior to the constitution of the Global Methodist Church, see David W. Scott, "The Traditionalist Bid for Africa," *UM & Global* (blog), accessed June 25, 2022, http://www.umglobal.org/2020/08/the-traditionalist-bid-for-africa.html.
[4] Global Methodist Church, "Vision."
[5] The Global Methodist Church, "The Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline," 2022, https://globalmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Transitional-Discipline.2022041257.pdf. Henceforth, references to the document will remain on the body of the document marked as TBDD with paragraph numbers.
[6] The expression comes from Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

cultures," cited above, will have to be put in tension with documents from Global Methodist leaders and theologians who present "culture" in opposition to church traditions and gospel truths. I will be suggesting that a flat reading of culture devoid of attention to power and the history of American imperialism puts the vision of a global denomination in peril. It further exposes the provincialism in the writings of Global Methodists. I argue that many of the slippages in the discourse of the emerging denomination are yet another symptom of the imperial condition that befalls the project of a global denomination.

My reflection is divided in three parts. I first offer a close reading of recent statements and documents by conservative and traditionalist Methodists aligned with the Global Methodist Church to identify how they have projected the "culture wars" peculiar to the United States onto other regions of the globe. Secondly, I suggest that Global Methodism's controversial attitude against United Methodism harbors a more profound difficulty in recognizing and acknowledging realities that cannot be captured by doctrinal statements of claims for orthodoxy. In closing, I gesture in the direction of a passage from the notion of a "global" denomination to the image of a "planetary" assembly as a vision and a tactic for resisting the spirit of empire latent in global Methodism.

Global Church, Local Fights

Global Methodists allude often to John Wesley's aphorism, "I consider the entire world as my parish."[7] The denomination's website suggests that leaders from many countries and many

[7] For the historical context in which John Wesley made this affirmation and a reflection on how the usage of the expression amongst Methodists often neglect it, see David W. Scott, "The World Is Not My Parish," *United Methodist Insight* (blog), May 4, 2022, https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/the-world-is-not-my-parish/. In addition to the historical inaccuracy, I would also like to point out the fact that Wesley's statement came in the context of a polemic with leaders in the Church of England who deemed his preaching at certain churches to be irregular. In this reading, "the world is my parish" is Wesley's justification for breaking with church polity, which is ironic given the accusations that conservative United Methodists and members of the Global Methodists make against those who, today, also break with church polity and discipline in the matter of the recognition of the ministry of queer clergy.

languages have expressed the desire for a new expression of Methodism. The aspirational goal is laudable, it must be stressed. At times, however, Global Methodism demonstrates an unwillingness to interrogate the imperial inheritance in Methodism, especially as it represents this global "partnership" between its constituents in the global north and those in the global south. More importantly, as I will demonstrate in the paragraphs below, the theological statements of Global Methodism are representative of social and cultural tensions that are unique to the United States. The ecclesial identity of Global Methodism is built upon disputes that can only be conceived of as provincial.

The setup for the emergence of the Global Methodist Church is thoroughly polemical. This is only natural considering that the denomination emerges as a result of a schism within United Methodism. The poles in the dispute are therefore understandably reflective of the tensions that have marred The United Methodist Church for the past five decades. But the terms of this tension are far from global. The polemic that shapes Global Methodism as a denomination is discernably American, as are the patterns emerging from its initial documents and doctrinal statements. In them, the church's adversary is presented as the "co-optation" of the church by "culture."[8] But whose culture? As I indicate below, this question remains unasked in the founding documents of the Global Methodist Church. These assume culture as a detrimental force, while letting typically American cultural dispositions and assumptions govern the central tenets of the denomination.

The recent volume *Next Methodism* serves as good point of departure to track this polemic against culture. The volume promises to deliver the "foundations" for global

[8] See, for one notable example, see Mike Lowry, "Crossing the Rubicon: A Bishop Says Goodbye to the United Methodist Church," *Firebrand Magazine*, May 1, 2022, https://firebrandmag.com/articles/crossing-the-rubicon-a-bishop-says-goodbye-to-the-united-methodist-church.

Methodism, grounding a new denomination in right doctrine, proper ecclesial governance, and evangelical piety. The volume stresses the global nature of the denomination, even though perspectives from outside the United States are only presented much later in the volume.

The image that orients the opening pages of *Next Methodism* is that of a funeral march: the Roman Empire exemplifies the "death knell for heretofore thriving movements that now line the ash heap of history," writes Kenneth Collins, one of the volume's editor and author of its introduction.[9] The terms of the polemic pit the church against empire while closing off the possibility that one's view of the church is not far removed from the influence of empire. In this register, empire and culture can only "co-opt" the church. They are never acknowledged as forces that shape our very understanding of what the church is, and no attention is given to how one discerns between spirits of imperial and hegemonic cultures and the spirit of a life-giving gospel. Collins is nevertheless certain: the church must preserve its identity against the threats imposed by culture. The enemies of the church are the "co-opting forces of culture [that] over time can transform a theological tradition and thereby undermine its earlier, commonly celebrated identity."[10] As we will continue to observe through the pages of *Next Methodism*, the narrative of a loss of identity is important for Global Methodism. For Collins, Methodism has been raised by God in continuation of this "commonly celebrated identity" as a representative of "real, true, proper scriptural Christianity."[11]

This identity is under attack by contemporary cultural forces. At points in the volume authors will respond by engaging in an all-out culture war. The enemy is now The United

[9] Kenneth J. Collins, "Introduction," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 12.
[10] Collins, 13.
[11] Collins, 14.

Methodist Church. The "UMC will increasingly accommodate the broader culture," James R. Thobaben writes. "They will agree with social media giants, academic elites, and members of the federal bureaucracy, the denominational bureaucrats in Nashville and Washington, and in the various episcopal offices while asserting that they speak the truth to power."[12] The text moves at blazing speed, comparing and somewhat equating the power of social media corporations to that of bishops in the United Methodist Church or the power of intellectuals—another familiar enemy of traditionalists—and members of the federal bureaucracy, supposedly in the United States government. A vague analysis of culture can only lead to a misplaced power analysis. That prepares the way for the fundamental attack that *Next Methodism* will direct at United Methodists. Thobaben accuses those who "disregard… sexual purity, denying it is an important component of holy living." He concludes with the announcement of impending doom: "They will function as court prophets of a dying religious organization, proudly virtue signaling to a society that could not care less."[13] As one notices, the stakes could not be higher in the polemic against United Methodism. The narrative follows the pattern of a diatribe against culture, against a culture that threatens to steal the church's identity, purity, traditions, and documents.

But who has denied the importance of holy living? What social media giants? What academic elites? None of these are named, only presumed, for the force of this polemic is precisely to create its own adversary, to put them into a corner and frame them in the way that will sustain the polemic. While the force of the polemic assures Global Methodism of its identity along the "Great Tradition" of Christian orthodoxy, it also discloses its provincial origins in

[12] James R. Thobaben, "The Sexual Ethics of the Body of Christ and the Way Forward," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 369.
[13] Thobaben, 369.

cultural and social tensions unique to the United States context in the early portions of the twenty-first century.

Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, offers a chapter on political theology in *Next Methodism*. He accuses twentieth-century Methodists of being "utterly leftists" in the 1930s under the influence of the social gospel and of abandoning "Christian moral orthodoxy" in 1970 when General Conference endorsed "unrestricted abortion."[14] That tradition, according to Tooley, paved the way for the debate over homosexuality after 1972. In this context, the public witness of the church "became indistinguishable from secular left-wing activism."[15] The essay goes on to say that Methodism embraced a "mostly materialistic political theology invested in centralized government's expansive social welfare and regulatory state, rejecting or minimizing the state's vocation for police and military powers, and ratifying the sexual revolution by accepting its anthropology of atomized, self-empowered individuals liberated from nature, natural law, and traditional Christian teaching."[16] The political landscape described by Tooley discloses its American provenance.

But the real issue here emerges because this effort at producing a political theology for "next" Methodism offers more than a diagnosis of the past. Its rendition of the Methodist history in the twentieth century entails a blueprint for a desired expression of global Methodism for the twenty-first. In the adversarial tone common to *Next Methodism*, Tooley lays out his political vision for small government combined with a recognition of the police and the military as foundational to a government's legitimate use of power, another veiled response to the context of

[14] Mark Tooley, "Political Theology for Global Methodism," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 242.
[15] Tooley, 243.
[16] Tooley, 243.

controversies around police violence in the United States. The question must be raised: how will this political theology meet a global ecclesial body? Consider the case of nations whose recent memories include military-backed genocidal governments or cases of rampant corruption driven by the opening of its markets to international corporation under the banner of "small government." Tooley's political theology, presented as doctrinally Wesleyan, is likely to encounter a global audience that will take it for what it is: yet another instance of the conflation of American civil religion disguised under the cloak of evangelical zeal.

The belligerence against culture and the American bias of *Next Methodism* remain flagrant in the section devoted to "global Methodism," the closing section of the volume. Peter J. Bellini celebrates a new global denomination as being able to be an "instrument of God" to renew Methodism and "spread scriptural holiness."[17] This new Methodism will correct the mistakes committed by a United Methodist Church that remained caught up in "culture" and allowed it to drive the mission of the church.[18] Bellini points out that the "global United Methodist Church was structured for U.S. dominance with minimal measures of cultural autonomy given to Central conferences compared to the weight of cultural hegemony assumed by Americans."[19] The point is well taken and historically salient. It is followed by yet another important remark, this time indicating that a global denomination can only function when "it allows for people of every culture to fulfill the call of God through its own governance, propagation, support, and theology."[20] The polemical tone commonly adopted in *Next Methodist* takes a quick rest as the need for cultural humility seems to take a more prominent role in the

[17] Peter J. Bellini, "A Global Movement," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 415–16.
[18] Bellini, 417.
[19] Bellini, 420.
[20] Bellini, 420–21.

analysis. But this is a short-lived moment as Bellini's essay quickly resorts back to tropes common to the culture wars: "If there is to be a next Methodism, we need to treat the institutional ADHD (Attention and Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) that has plagued our sense of missional direction. For decades, we have aimlessly chased every politically and culturally correct pet interest down every rabbit hole."[21] The hostility toward culture nevertheless hides the cultural provincialism of the analysis as we are taken to the middle of the culture wars of the American context: "The difference is that now we can offer the Scripture way of salvation, which flows from the doctrine of the church, rather than offering an uncritical social wokeness peddled by the culture."[22] While filled with moral outrage, statements like this are barely legible to a cultural context beyond the United States. Its provincialism cannot be remedied by its claim to doctrinal purity nor its moral outrage.

After this sequence of argument, the essay goes through a quick global awakening. "Rather than responding to the impulses of the culture, the church discerns where the Spirit preveniently is already at work and submits to his purposes."[23] This has been amply established in the essay and in the volume until this point. But Bellini offers this in the next sentence: "In practical global terms, it may mean the West needs to accept the dynamic instrumentality of the church in the majority world in terms of its sheer numbers, vitality, and spiritual impact and allow the Lord to do likewise in its own churches."[24] This expression is worthy of a highlight: the west may need to resign itself to the "dynamic instrumentality of the church" in the "majority world." Bellini seems to suggest that the task of churches in the west is to follow the leadership

[21] Bellini, 422. With the risk of being "politically correct," in Bellini's use of the term, I must resist the use of a mental health diagnosis as analogy for what the author understands to be doctrinal negligence.
[22] Bellini, 417–18.
[23] Bellini, 418.
[24] Bellini, 418.

of churches in the global south. This is most certainly a noble sentiment and Bellini later on acknowledges the "gift of the Spirit's renewal" that comes from the southern hemisphere.[25] The concerning part comes next as Bellini announces what he perceives to be the contribution of the northern hemisphere to a global Methodist connection. From the north, he states, there will be "widespread resources for development."[26]

The dynamic remains transactional: the global south has spiritual vitality; the north has the money. This is not a new claim, much less an innocent one. What appears as a strong commitment to a global expression of Methodism harbors the projection of unacknowledged imperial aspirations. On the one hand, Bellini's explicit reference to the resources coming from the northern hemisphere run the risk of glossing over the fact that access to resources shapes power differentials. He states: "An emerging global Methodist church may recharge and resuscitate the 'valley of dry bones' (Ezek. 37:1–14) in the West that, in turn, can undergird and support mission and development throughout the world."[27] David R. Thomas' chapter in *Next Methodism* offers a similar prognosis as he connects the survival of American Christianity and the values embraced by next Methodism.[28] Part of the transactional nature of the enterprise described by Bellini is the underlying assumption that the west can buy its way into a spiritual revival. On the other hand, one sees in statements such as this the typical western anxiety about declining church membership. From a Christian ecclesiological perspective, the association

[25] Bellini, 424.
[26] Bellini, 424.
[27] Bellini, 424.
[28] The text reads: "Clearly, it is no exaggeration to recognize how these next two or three decades are make-or-break for American Christianity. Similarly, it is no mere coincidence to see these same years as the open door for the next Methodism." David R. Thomas, "Opportunity for Awakening," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 322.

between numerical growth and church vitality is anything but certain.[29] It nevertheless remains central to the analysis that authors in *Next Methodism* offer about the reasons for their departure from United Methodism. David Scott has suggested that fear of membership decline bespeaks "theological anxieties" that are "heightened for Methodists from the United States, where there is a high cultural emphasis on numerical growth as a demonstration of success and a high cultural stigma on numerical decline as a demonstration of failure."[30] Hence, the desire to obtain the same level of "explosive growth in the global South" is not simply a matter of retrieving church vitality.[31] This might be yet another symptom of the unacknowledged sense of loss of imperial Christianity with its hegemonic power over a society.

The global aspirations of the Global Methodist Church are informed by the problematic perception that the global south is somehow a depository of primitive truths the west has neglected, a space where natives preserve what the west has lost, a location that holds the key to an imperial past that the west has disavowed. Even the somewhat benevolent recognition of the vitality of the church in the global south is problematic if perceived as an instrumental means to obtain a similar vitality in the north. These perceptions of the globe—the north and its resources, the south and its spiritual explosiveness—will undoubtedly shape the internal dynamics of Global Methodism. The denomination and its founding documents cast a vision of a global denomination where members have equal voice and ecclesial power. These documents nevertheless continue to bespeak the cultural provincialism of their authors while attempting to shape the denominational ethos of Global Methodism. As evidenced by the transactional

[29] See, for example, Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).
[30] David W. Scott, "US Membership Decline and the Rhetoric of the Global Church," *UM & Global* (blog), April 21, 2021, http://www.umglobal.org/2021/04/us-membership-decline-and-rhetoric-of.html.
[31] Bellini, "A Global Movement," 424.

representation between southern and northern hemispheres in Bellini's analysis, an unacknowledged American bias is all the more concerning for it may disguise old colonial tropes and aspirations.

The lack of *critical* cultural analysis is the danger incurred by those who blame culture for the ills of the church. This is a thought of culture that disregards how cultures get produced, negotiated, and also suppressed. As Joerg Rieger has remarked, the trope of "Christ against culture" is not new, having been famously considered by H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. Rieger's own contribution in *Christ and Empire* challenges us to be wary of treating culture "apart from issues of power."[32] What gets dismissed as "culture" is often what informs the type of argument that places the "theological truths" as standing above and beyond culture. The danger is that uninterrogated and yet powerful cultural forces operate under the surface. Rieger is correct in suggesting the narrow-mindedness of this approach: "In the thick of the culture wars, it may seem that there is no way out but to pick one of these camps—determined by the current American imagination—or to stay somewhere near the center as it is gradually pulled to the right in the current climate."[33]

Culture, which is singularly understood as a corrosive force working against the gospel by the authors of *Next Methodism*, will soon become a necessary site of negotiation for Global Methodists. Scott rightly suggests that such an approach will likely become unsustainable for a global denomination.[34] At present, homosexuality provides the battleground for the culture wars and therefore grants a temporary common ground for traditionalists in the United States and their

[32] Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), vii.
[33] Jeorg Rieger, "The Ill-Fated Impasse of United Methodist Theology: A Constructive Proposal beyond the Middle Road," *United Methodist Insight*, March 21, 2021, https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/the-ill-fated-impasse-of-united-methodist-theology/.
[34] David W. Scott, "The Problems of a Global Traditionalist Church," *United Methodist Insight* (blog), August 13, 2020, https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/the-problems-of-a-global-traditionalist-church/.

counterparts in Africa, the Philippines, Europe, and Eurasia. The formation of the Global Methodist Church will provide the end of this shared identity. U.S. Traditionalists will then likely find themselves in a denomination where their assumptions about a "global" church will be challenged by voices who do not share the same perspectives on what the global nature of the church means. When the possibility of blaming the co-opting forces of culture is gone, U.S. traditionalists in the Global Methodist Church are likely to perceive their social and economic force will stand in the way of a truly global denomination where all members share "equal voice and leadership." The tension never quite explicitly acknowledged by Global Methodism is the processes whereby doctrinal purity will be obtained in the context of power-laden cultural diversity.

Throughout the pages of *Next Methodism*, one is drawn to the epicenter of the "culture wars" waged in the United States. Attacks directed at The United Methodist Church are abundant and reflect distinctly American social and political concerns. Quite often, the conservative and traditionalist authors of the volume perform a call to arms against culture while remaining inattentive to the cultural grounds in which they stand. In this context, what may come "next" for Methodism will run the risk of reproducing not so much the "Great Tradition" that the authors in the volume seek to preserve, but the unacknowledged continuation of the hegemonic cultural heritage of the United States.[35]

Extravagant Loves, Diverging Paths

The mission of the Global Methodist Church declares its intent to "make disciples of Jesus Christ who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly."[36] The statement

[35] For the reference to the "Great Tradition," see Collins, "Introduction."
[36] See "Preface" in The Global Methodist Church, "The Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline."

echoes the call for discipleship present in The United Methodist mission statement ("to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"), but drops the call for world transformation. There might be a polemical undertone to the change that associates worldly transformation to the impositions of culture or as a secondary matter.[37] Instead, Global Methodists offer the triad of worship, love, and witness followed by their appropriate qualifiers. The dissonance in the statement is perhaps found in its call to an "extravagant" love. In some its historical meanings, extravagant signifies that which "wanders out of bounds," something that is "straying" or "roaming" and "[varies] widely from what is usual or proper." It refers to something "strange" or "unbecoming." The etymology of extravagant, in short, refers to what is "widely divergent."[38] But a love that diverges from the norm is definitely outside the goals of the new denomination.

In January 2022, a gathering of traditionalist and conservative Wesleyan scholars in the context of the United States produced a document entitled "The Faith once Delivered." The scope of the document is bold: "to offer 'a constructive voice' that clearly articulates the Wesleyan understanding of Christian orthodoxy'" and to "guide the theological trajectory of Methodism for the next century or more."[39] Mark Tooley joked that it could become for

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[37] Kevin Watson writes: "[The] dominant strain of Methodism actually *conformed* to the dominant culture. It did not, as the UMC presumptuously ascribes to itself today, lead the way in progress or 'the transformation of the world.' On the contrary, United Methodism in the United States was more often transformed by the world. Kevin Watson, "Methodism Dividing," *First Things (New York, N.Y.)*, 2020, 1–9; see also Mike Lowry, "The Birth Pangs of the next Methodism," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 349, n. 2.

[38] "Extravagant," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2022), https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/67142.

[39] The first sentence is taken from Ryan Danker, director of the John Wesley Institute that convened the summit and helped in editing the document. Daniel Silliman, "Theologians Craft Wesleyan Agreement for a Divided Methodist Era," *Christianity Today*, May 24, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/next-methodism-methodist-wesleyan-theology-document.html. The second sentence comes from the document itself: Ryan N. Danker, Jonathan Powers, and Kevin Watson, eds., "The Faith Once Delivered: A Wesleyan Witness," 2022, para. 1, https://nextmethodism.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Faith-Once-Delivered-FINAL-1.pdf. Henceforth, references to the document will remain on the body of the document marked as FoD with paragraph numbers.

Methodists what the Synod of Dort was for the Reformed tradition.[40] Like documents produced in the context of the Protestant Reformation, "The Faith Once Delivered" embraces the genre of a confession of faith. Unlike other documents, however, it remains elusive as the source of its authority to receive, interpret, and proclaim Methodist doctrine. Historically, Methodists understood that doctrine was discerned through holy conferencing and that the creedal tradition embraced by the Christian faith is conciliar. This collective form of discernment is not explicitly named by the authors of the document. It is also concerning that a document that aims at shaping global Methodism in the twenty-first century only included authors from the United States. The document affirms that efforts were made to include voices from all areas of the globe, but these efforts were hindered by the coronavirus pandemic (FoD ¶2). I should not linger too much on the lack of global representation so as to focus more closely on how the document—and others—construct the identity of Global Methodism.

The driving image of "The Faith Once Delivered" is the concept of humanity as created in the image of God. The document presents an elegant account of Christian teaching, from the apostolic age to the present times with special emphasis on the patristic period and the Wesleyan revival. The confession does however reverberate the familiar vocabulary of the of the co-optation of the church by culture and other unnamed forces, despite the assurance given by one of its editors that the document did not aim at being polemical.[41] With some poetic license, the document analogizes between the "faith once delivered" and a river: it acknowledges that the Christian message has flowed steadily and incorporated "minerals and particles" along the way comparable to "tastes and expressions to the great old flow [that] enhance our appreciation of it."

[40] Silliman, "Theologians Craft Wesleyan Agreement for a Divided Methodist Era."
[41] Ryan Danker, director of the John Wesley Institute, told *Christianity Today* that "the document is not intended to be polemical, or even really original." Silliman.

The statement adds: "Sadly, some admixtures prove to be unnecessary or even pollutants that, though they may abide in the waters for a time (even a long time), must be and will be ultimately cleansed from its course by the same faithful Holy Spirit" (FoD ¶104). The language of impurity is subtle, but its unnamed target is obvious.

The emerging Global Methodist Church seems disposed to offer silent attacks at communities of diverging gender expressions. Collins' chapter in *Next Methodism* takes issue with the language of "love," though the reader will have to fill in the many ellipses in his text. The Methodist movement, he surmises, was indeed concerned about love. But not any love. It was "*holy* love—humble, sacrificial love—not a self-indulgent or self-referential love."[42] Queer love is not mentioned, only implied by the qualifier "holy" which signals that the appeal to love in queer experiences is not holy. "Therefore, the proper summation of John Wesley's practical theology… is both holiness (holy love) and grace (both free and cooperant)—never one without the other."[43] Collins is concerned about a view of love that, in his words, "[celebrates] the degrading and enslaving aspects of particular human *lusts*."[44] It is once again the task of the reader to fill in the blank and guess that what Collins portrays as lust is queer love. Collins goes as far as to suggest that this unnamed rival of holy love is selfish and "ethnocentric."[45] The pattern reappears as cultural elites are named as responsible for this unnamed enemy: "[The] gospel story of holy love rooted in the atoning work of Jesus Christ has effectively been switched

[42] Kenneth J. Collins, "Holy Love as a Key to What Sanctification Is All About," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 26. Emphasis in the original.
[43] Collins, 45.
[44] Collins, 49.
[45] One important and intriguing observation is that the word "ethnocentrism" was originally coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, often accused by conservative philosophers and theologians alike of being a "relativist" and a destroyer of the great canon of Western thought. The irony in Collins' use of the term is compiled by the fact that in its first usage by Derrida, "ethnocentrism" refers to the association between written language and that which is perceived as immutable. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Fortieth-Anniversary edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 3.

out in which another story, an alien narrative, often championed by cultural elites, has now been declared to be the real meaning of the good news for all people."[46] Not many pages before this, readers had been introduced to the idea that love is indeed a matter of loving the "other," an outward movement. Now, it is alien forces coming from outside that are threatening holy love. Collins' text slips through this attempt at defining holy love as pure love of the other, while maintaining the need to police this alien, unnamed other that claims the name of love for itself. Collins is certain: this unnamed adversary cannot be love, cannot be holy, cannot be pure. It must be an alien imposition. Might "holy love" survive in the midst of so many other aliens in the context of a global denomination? Might this love be truly extravagant and embrace that which is divergent?

Some sections in *Next Methodism* offer a more direct attack on queer love, though the rhetoric of policing divergence is no less stringent. Maxie Dunnam, for example, is clear about his embrace of the Houston Declaration and its opposition to the "practice of homosexuality."[47] Parenthetically—and it appears to be symptomatic that this happens within a parenthesis—the *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* of the Global Methodist Church defines gender as "a person's immutable biological traits identified by or before birth" (TBDD ¶306). It also requires its ministers to embrace "fidelity in a Christian marriage between one man and one woman, [and] chastity in singleness" (TBDD ¶405.2). "The Faith Once Delivered" is even more economical in its reference to sexuality: "The Scripture provides God's vision for life and happiness, true wholeness, including but not limited to human flourishing, the good of singleness, the marriage of one man and one woman, true friendship, fulfillment in vocation, and

[46] Collins, "Holy Love as a Key to What Sanctification Is All About," 49.
[47] Maxie Dunnam, "Theological Accountability," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 73.

holy community" (FoD ¶101). Later in *Next Methodism* we encounter a chapter on marriage that is explicit about its normative claims about holy love and what constitutes marriage. Warren Smith is clear that marriage is divinely instituted as a "spiritual friendship" between a man and a woman for the purpose of bearing children.[48] He argues that this is a countercultural position.[49] On a similar vein, Thobaben argues that "late modern Western sexual morality" is the new embodiment of colonialism.[50]

Colonialism and imperialism make no appearance in the *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* of the Global Methodist Church nor in "The Faith Once Delivered."[51] At times, however, the terms surface in conservative Methodist circles in the polemic against the recognition of the ministry of queer clergy and same-sex unions. It is not uncommon that conservative Methodist leaders turn to the language of colonial imposition of a "gay agenda" by liberal Methodists in western societies. This claim goes beyond the context of Methodism and is in fact a live debate in the social sciences, in gender theory, and postcolonial studies. The case of Africa is the most visible site where these disputes take place. Adriaan van Klinken has

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[48] Warren Smith, "The Significance of Marriage," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 358. The stress bearing children suggests that, for Smith, a heterosexual couple with no children is outside the zone of marital purity.

[49] Smith, 359.

[50] Thobaben, "The Sexual Ethics of the Body of Christ and the Way Forward," 370.

[51] In its section on "Our Witness to the World" (¶202), the *Transitional Book of Doctrine and Discipline* expressed concerns for "disparities in wealth and resources, both among individuals and nations" and suggests that this is the cause of poverty. Still, no direct mention is made to how these disparities have been historically constructed in the context of colonialism. It is also worthy of mention that none of the authors in *Next Methodism* offer any extensive account of imperialism or colonialism. The only passing reference to the topic appears in Eduard Khegay's essay: "Today, when I ask many Methodists in Eurasia what are some of the most important factors that inspired them to become Methodists, their answers always include welcoming people and being an inclusive church. I am confident that this should be a strong characteristic of the next Methodism. The world tends to divide and exclude people. Racism and colonialism persist. The walls go higher and the labeling spreads like a virus. Does the church have a different message?" Eduard Khegay, "Eurasia: Lessons from the Past, Hopes for the Future," in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker, Kindle (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022), 453.

On the matter of conservative movements in the United States suggesting that there is a colonial imposition of a "gay agenda," it must be remembered that the vast majority of conservative Christians in the United States have historically opposed twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa.

suggested that the "idea of homosexuality as 'un-African,' 'unnatural,' and 'un-Christian' was prevalent throughout the twentieth century, reinforced by European colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, and in recent decades by HIV-prevention strategies."[52] Neville Hoad illustrates how the formation of a postcolonial African identity established against the category of homosexuality is indissociable from the sexual discipline imposed by the British.[53] Furthermore, the anti-gay agenda in African countries has become a truly transnational endeavor with robust funding of anti-LGBTQ initiatives by U.S. conservative Christian groups. Between 2008 and 2018, the Fellowship Foundation, for example, sent more than $20 million dollars to fund anti-gay movements and policies in Uganda alone.[54] As amply reported by Kapya Kaoma, the turning of homosexuality as a contentious point in sub-Saharan Africa is a direct reflection of the cultural context of the United States with profound consequences for gender dynamics in the

[52] Adriaan Van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 4. In a study conducted with Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, Klinken has analyzed "the ways in which homosexuality is addressed in contemporary African theological writing." The study concluded that "homosexuality has been actively opposed, especially by theologians working in the paradigm of inculturation theology, who tend uncritically to join the choir of those who argue that homosexuality is incompatible with 'African values,' and who adopt a rather static concept of 'African culture,' selectively ignoring the historical and anthropological evidence of same-sex sexualities in African cultures and societies." Van Klinken, 21. For a history of the formation of the idea of a "heterosexual Africa," see Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

[53] Neville Wallace Hoad, *African Intimacies Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[54] Lydia Namubiru and Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, "Exclusive: US Christian Right Pours More than $50m into Africa," *Open Democracy*, October 29, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/africa-us-christian-right-50m/. The Fellowship Foundation defines itself thusly:
"Incorporated in 1949, The Fellowship Foundation, Inc., is a faith-based, non-profit organization established for the purpose of providing fiduciary oversight and accountability to a wide range of ministries. These ministries are conducted primarily by an ecumenical, bi-partisan fellowship of laypeople of all ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. As followers of Jesus, we seek relationally to introduce the all-consuming, transforming and reconciling person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth to people from all walks of life and every nation of the world." See, https://thefellowshipfoundation.org.

The Ugandan case is exemplary against the claim that queer agenda is an imposition because the so-called "Kill the Gays" policy approved by Parliament in 2009 builds upon colonial-era legislation that regulates "carnal knowledge against the order of nature." See Amar Wahab, "'Homosexuality/Homophobia Is Un-African'?: Un-Mapping Transnational Discourses in the Context of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill/Act," *Journal of Homosexuality* 63, no. 5 (2016): 685–718, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1111105.

continent.[55] The implications for religious communities are equally vast. Elizabeth Khaxas and Saskia Wieringa have traced how homophobia was directly fomented in areas of Namibia in the context of ethnic tensions where the more urban and Christian Ovambo tended to adopt homophobic traditions compared to the more rural and less Christianized Damara.[56]

Starting with the schism between the Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican communion, sexuality has turned into a battleground that pits western churches against African churches. As I have been stressing, the terms of the debate are often framed as a matter of allegiance or departure from Christian teaching, but the tensions are overdetermined by the afterlives of colonialism and imperialism. Amar Wahab has suggested that both the anti-gay coalition as well as the pro-gay transnational movements have to be conceived of along the lines of global structures in their current neoliberal format.[57] With the crumbling of national sovereignty at the expanse of multinational private corporations, the discourse of homosexuality as "un-African" ought to be perceived as a transnational discourse that seeks to "[invent] tradition… and then establish 'solidarity as a proxy' across different nations and cultures."[58] This invention of tradition functions to situate African communities as stable and as representatives of

[55] Kapya Kaoma, "The U.S. Christian Right and the Attack on Gays in Africa," *Political Research Associates*, December 1, 2009, https://politicalresearch.org/2009/12/01/us-christian-right-and-attack-gays-africa; Kapya Kaoma, "Exporting the Anti-Gay Movement," *The American Prospect*, April 24, 2012, https://prospect.org/world/exporting-anti-gay-movement/; Kaoma, Kapya John, "How the U.S. Christian Right Is Transforming Sexual Politics in Africa" (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, 2012), https://www.sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/colonizingafricanvaluespra.pdf. For a summary of the literature and history on the influence of the Christian Right movement in Africa and a case study of the schism between the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion due to the question of homosexuality, see Marcia Oliver, "Transnational Sex Politics, Conservative Christianity, and Antigay Activism in Uganda," *Studies in Social Justice* 7, no. 1 (2013): 90–93, https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v7i1.1056.

[56] Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2005), 121–27. See also Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, 18.

[57] Wahab, "'Homosexuality/Homophobia Is Un-African'?: Un-Mapping Transnational Discourses in the Context of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill/Act."

[58] Wahab, 706–7.

a past that the West has dangerously abandoned. What goes unnamed or unnoticed is that this "identity" has been built under the aegis of colonial power.

An interview conducted by Mark Tooley with Liberian United Methodist theologian Jerry Kulah offers an example of this.[59] Tooley is interested in how African United Methodists "prevented UMC from following other USA based Mainline Protestant denominations from abandoning biblical sexual ethics."[60] The question that follows can only be rhetorical: "Why is UMC in Africa so committed to traditional biblical beliefs?" This is less of a question and more of an invitation to confirm the premise of the question. Kulah only partially embraces those expectations for he corrects Tooley in suggesting that the vote during the United Methodist General Conference in 2019 was itself a global vote, not an African vote. Kulah nevertheless will go on to partially confirm the expected answer from Tooley with a claim about doctrinal purity. African United Methodists, Kulah suggests, "are committed to traditional biblical beliefs because that is what we know as the unchanging, infallible Word of God since the birth of the Christian Church in Africa."[61] In this theological account of the birth of the church in Africa, we are taken to a specific time in history: "The early missionaries and episcopal leaders from America to Africa were all committed to traditional biblical beliefs. Traditional biblical beliefs form part of our spiritual DNA." Kulah has therefore confirmed the bias in Tooley's question with an inaccurate history of African Christianity.[62] The historical inaccuracy is nevertheless beside the point. The issue at stake is the charged terrain in which the dialogue between Tooley and Kulah takes place. In the dialogue, Tooley and Kulah share a common sexual ethic, but they diverge

[59] For a further reflection on the interaction between Tooley and Kulah, see Scott, "The Problems of a Global Traditionalist Church."
[60] Mark Tooley, "Jerry Kulah on Africa's Methodist Future," *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy's Blog* (blog), accessed July 19, 2022, https://juicyecumenism.com/2020/05/26/jerry-kulah-africa-initiative/.
[61] Tooley.
[62] The Christian presence in sub-Saharan Africa predates the nineteenth century.

deeply on how they come to this narrative: Tooley is engaged in a polemic against pro-gay movements in his native United States, Kulah defending a certain view of African theological autonomy. Because of the charged terrain in which the conversation takes place, Kulah's claim to doctrinal orthodoxy must refer to the arrival of American bishops and missionaries in the nineteenth century. The dialogue between Tooley and Kulah is overdetermined by this colonial heritage.

What may appear as reversal of roles between Americans and Africans in the interaction between Tooley and Kulah in fact confirms the authority of American missionaries and the perceived orthodoxy they represented, including their nineteenth-century sexual ethic. I insist: what is at stake in here is not the history of missionary activity, which is simultaneously far more complex than a process of theological colonization and yet inseparable from it. What is really at stake is the reconstruction of a narrative that associates doctrinal authority with an imagined, homogenous Methodist identity brought by American missionaries to Africa in the nineteenth century. That Methodist orthodox identity has merged with the African postcolonial identity endorsed by Kulah. In this instance, he must speak for Africa in such a way to confirm the destiny made manifest to American missionaries in the nineteenth century. But when Kulah's narrative is appropriated by his current allies in conservative Methodist circles, the story changes completely from a story about theological and ecclesial autonomy to a story about the loss of theological truth on the part of Methodists in the United States. By narrating the crisis of United Methodism as a case study of a denomination doomed by its co-optation by culture, conservative Methodists in the United States demand their partners in the global south to embrace that heritage.

The schism in United Methodism and the formation of the Global Methodist Church is therefore another chapter in a dispute that has become transnational over the past decades. The transnational character of United Methodism situates the tensions within the denomination in the difficult global crossroads. Admittedly, the denomination has not found ecclesial structures where these negotiations can be engaged in a more generative way and some essays in the present volume provide historical and theological perspectives about this.

As the Global Methodist Church is launched, the fundamental global structures remain intact and the historical tensions between U.S. Christianity and Christian communities in Africa remain unaltered. As I have been trying to stress, the ecclesial identity of Global Methodism relies on theological and social animosities brewing in the United States. These tensions do not easily cross international borders without having a ripple effect in different contexts. The theological identity of the Global Methodist Church is gaining shape in a polemical context that stresses allegiance to the Christian doctrinal tradition against the impositions of culture and of that which is perceived as divergences in gender and sexuality.

Global Methodism faces challenges in meeting its noble call to "love extravagantly." Traditionally, this type of love entails something "flagrantly excessive," "widely divergent," and "discrepant."[63] One need not remain within the confines of this etymology, naturally, but such have been the traditional meanings of the term in English. Global Methodism will likely need to diverge from them.

[63] "Extravagant."

Global Churches, Planetary Assembling

Mark Twain receives credit for having said that "history does not repeat itself; it rhymes." The historical development of The United Methodist Church in the twentieth century has its share of rhymes with the history of American empire. Global Methodism, as much as it represents its identity in a polemic against United Methodism, is starting to produce its own imperial rhymes. As familiar as the image is, the spinning globe carries with it assumptions proper of a notion of the globe that has been formed and developed under the spirit of empire. As a totalizing view, the globe is never just a vision of all peoples and nations of the world coming together. With that image ingrained in its name, Global Methodism is carrying uninterrogated assumptions and replicating known imperial patterns.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth-century, United Methodism struggled with its global reach. Its ecclesial structures and methods of deliberation—especially its General Conference—proved inadequate. "Holy conferencing," a mark of Wesleyan ecclesiology, was rarely a means of grace for the denomination. Alongside the tensions around human sexuality, church governance, and doctrinal matters, the schism of The United Methodist Church is to be understood as yet another fracture in the history of empire and its global pretenses. As many essays in this volume have indicated, attention to the flow of power in history and the cultural negotiations that happen in that context is central to an analysis of the schism in the denomination. The poles of conflict are themselves overdetermined by the imperial inheritance latent in Methodism.

The spirit of empire hovers above the formation of the globe, of the perception of homogeneity in that which is plural and mysteriously uncanny. Jacques Derrida has called attention to this through his concept of "globalatinization," an expression that refers to the fact

that "globalization" has been the global extension of an imperial memory that extends all the way back to Rome. It is a thoroughly Christian and imperial vision of the globe, Derrida affirms.[64] When unquestioned, claims for a global denomination run the risk of carrying over norms, political suppositions, and cultural patterns that are far from global. At worst, these projects replicate global designs that have been shaped by empire. The vision of a global denomination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is unthinkable outside the imperial aspirations of the United States.

Yet, resistance to the spirit of empire does not entail letting go of commitments that are planetary in scope and solidarities that transgress national boundaries. Pointing out the entanglement between global Methodism and this imperial inheritance does not diminish the movement but can contribute to the tracking of the counter-imperial gestures in the tradition. The hope and the bias of the analysis is that both exist—and continue to rise up. In an epoch of rising nationalisms, a global ecclesial body can testify to a more excellent way. For a global denomination, that would entail turning the globe into an unfamiliar body, an assembly of living beings that escapes totalizations. That requires departing from the spinning globe as the operative metaphor and entering the unfamiliar zone of a *planetary assembling*.

Spivak has drawn the distinction between the "globe" and the "planet" to address, with regards to the former, a form of imagining the world as a homogenous entity engendered under the confines of imperialistic projects. For Spivak, we recall, the globe can only exist on the computer. As I suggested, the spinning globe is its most recent and common figuration that makes its way onto the imaginary of Global Methodism. The planet is distinct from the globe, but in a distinction that cannot be an opposition. "The planet is in the species of alterity,

[64] See Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40–100.

belonging to another system," writes Spivak. "It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe."[65] When she "invokes" the planet as a category, Spivak seeks to name—indeed to "nickname"—our human intendedness toward the other. We are creatures inclined in the direction of otherness. The planet is one such name for the "animating gift" of our other-bound intendedness. A planetary assembly would then be the gathering of a people committed to the unbounded mystery of the other, a community that takes upon itself the vocation to love that which is strange and "wandering." The spinning globe presents a familiar and manageable entity. The planet, living and uncanny, is of a different nature.

The turning to the other, one might say, is one way to name our desire for God. Global denominations are temporary and incomplete attempts at gathering together our shared inclinations to God in an assembly that cannot be confined to any one nation-state or vision of a unified globe. The theological project of a global denomination cannot be subsumed by any singular vision of what the "globe" is. I'm suggesting that "global" ought never to be a "fully appropriate" name for a mode of assembling that honors our shared intention for the other.[66] A planetary assembling constitutes a different public, a different social body. A planetary assembling disidentifies us from a globe that has been constituted by the spirit of empire. The planet renders unfamiliar that which empire has made familiar. The church as a planetary assembling is only legible as an act of queering, a rendering strange of what has been made familiar, too familiar.

In the age of imperial globalization, nationalist boundary-setting, and ecological calamity, a planetary assembling might be the most appropriate name for a world parish. The spirit of the old Wesleyan proverb is claimed by competing inheritors of the Methodist revival,

[65] Spivak, "'Planetarity' (Box 4, WELT)," 291.
[66] Global Methodist Church, "Vision."

but its planetary disposition remains elusive. The fact that we cannot pin down what a "world parish" ought to be is the hopeful sign that it does not belong to any one globe. Truly, the world that becomes a parish harbors the peculiar queerness of a warmed heart. One is entitled to hope that the strangeness of that experience will not let Methodism be consumed by the spirit of empire.