ABSTRACT
This article investigates British and North American Methodism and their relations with their respective empires, and the ambivalence between adaptation and resistance. Empires are described as powerful manipulators of religion. However, they are not capable of totally assuming the power of religion. This "theological surplus" is a sign of hope.

Key-words: British Methodism, American Methodism, post-colonial studies, Empire.

RESUMO
Este artigo investiga o metodismo britânico e estadunidense e suas relações com seus respectivos impérios, a ambivalência entre a adaptação e a resistência. Impérios são descritos como poderosos manipuladores da religião, entretanto, nunca capaz de assumir plenamente o poder sobre a religião. Este "theological surplus" é um sinal de esperança.

Palavras-chave: Metodismo Britânico, Metodismo Americana, estudos pós-coloniais, Império.

RESUMEN
Este artículo investiga el metodismo británico y estadounidense y sus relaciones con sus respectivos imperios, la ambivalencia entre la adaptación y la resistencia. Imperios son descritos como poderosos manipuladores de la religión, sin embargo, nunca capaz de asumir plenamente el poder sobre la religión. Este "theological surplus" es una señal de esperanza.

Palabras clave: metodismo británico, metodismo estadounidense, estudios pos-coloniales, imperio.

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In an earlier essay I introduced the topic of Methodism and Empire, investigating the beginnings. Like Christianity itself, Methodism was born in a context of empire. This context shaped important aspects of the movement, often unconsciously. Nevertheless, empire was never able to take over Christianity or Methodism completely. In order to understand the unique features of Methodism and the difference which it made in the past—and which it can still make today—we need to investigate this ongoing relation of Methodism and empire. In the process, there emerges what I have called a “theological surplus.”

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries contain many of the seeds of the current postcolonial situation. A closer look at Methodism in the U.S. is warranted because here Methodism thrived during a longer period than elsewhere. The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of great energy. The laity was a driving force; Methodism’s initial spread around the world was organized and carried out by lay people. The following observation by David Hempton sets the stage:

Methodism, like Pentecostalism, was a cultural revolution from below, not a political or ecclesiastical program imposed from above. It grew without external sponsorship and thrived among youthful and mobile populations exploiting the opportunities of new global markets.1

Women made up the majority of members. In all of these developments, however, empire was never far:

From the British side Methodism followed the trade routes and military deployments of early imperialism [...]. From the American side the push westward to the Pacific Ocean was equally relentless and inexorable.2

This does not necessarily mean that Methodists were intentionally endorsing imperialism, nor they were always benefiting from it. There is no reason to doubt that Methodists meant well and were intent on helping, even though the outcomes could be quite troublesome.

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2 Hempton, Methodism, 152. Hempton, ibid., 158, sums it up in terms of the two different imperialisms at work: “Methodism mapped the world on the back of two expanding civilizations. The first, the British, was to begin with an informal then a formal empire within which Methodism made its way through soldiers, sailors, migrants, traders, civilizers, and colonial governors. The second, the American, was an expansionist commercial empire, which sucked in migrants from all over the world and exported traders, educators, and doctors.”
Here is another example of the ambivalence of Methodism when it comes to empire, an ambivalence that can produce not only resistance but also adaptation. Methodism did indeed thrive “on the margins and frontiers of race and class, continental expansion and empire.” While resistance was part of these tensions, Hempton makes us aware of another trajectory as well: “Everywhere, Methodists began as cultural outsiders, but through work discipline and unquenchable passion for education, they remorselessly moved to the cultural center, sometimes with remarkable speed.” To be sure, Wesley questioned this sort of success story already in his own times; as the Methodists moved up in social status they seemed to lose their connection to the heart of the Methodist project. But this is often precisely what happened. In the U.S. slavery was first renounced and later affirmed; women were first liberated and later subdued. In post-Wesleyan England, as conflicts erupted along the lines of class, radicals were expelled and traditional chapels were built due to the desire for respect and acceptance by the powers that be.

From the nineteenth century on, Methodism was officially recognized as mainline. By 1850, Methodists made up 34 percent of Christianity in the U.S., and money began to flow, changing some of the basic paradigms, like itinerant and egalitarian ministry. New qualities sought in preachers would make them more acceptable to the middle class, including education, learning, self-improvement, and a reputation for philanthropy. Dominant culture and religion went increasingly hand in hand. As Dana Robert has pointed out: “The late nineteenth century women’s missionary movement conflated culture with religion, attributing the strengths of western culture to its Christianity, and the weaknesses of non-western culture to other religions.”

The theological foundations of these developments lay in a fundamental trust in the perfectibility of humanity, and in so-called “providential” means such as the spread of empire and the English language; also fundamental were the emphasis on personal conversion, the witness of the spirit, the cultivation of perfect love, and the anticipation of heavenly rewards. In short, there was an overarching optimism at work that was based on a firm trust in the righteousness of one’s own cause; and while it would have been clear that there are always shortcomings, there was little sense that the situation as a whole might be headed in the wrong direction.

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3 Hempton, Methodism, 31.
4 Hempton, Methodism, 102ff.
5 See Hempton, Methodism, 109, 125ff.
7 Hempton, Methodism, 168; 177.
An example of this theological optimism is the life and work of John R. Mott (1865-1955), a U.S. Methodist layperson and one of the most prominent leaders of Protestant missional and ecumenical movements of his time. His optimism was based on a firm trust in the power of God and the lordship of Christ. Where the Social Gospel movement in the U.S. asserted “the Christian law” or the “Kingdom of God,” Mott asserted the lordship of Christ. He harbors no doubt that the success of mission is guided by the divine; in his early book *Strategic Points in the World’s Conquest*, Mott insists that “God Himself has given all the increase.”

Mott was a mediator who sought to move Christianity to a position of global dominance. The “evangelization of the world in this generation” was his project. He bridged the gap between the Social Gospel and conservative Christianity. He sought to bring together piety and progress, faith in God’s revelation in Christ with faith in the achievements of modern science. Of great help in bridging these gaps was that both liberals and conservatives shared in a basic optimism, which pulled together Christ and progress. In the words of David Bosch: “Both liberals and conservatives shared the assumption that Christianity was the only basis for a healthy civilization; this was a form of consensus so fundamental that it operated mainly on an unconscious, presuppositional level.” While the shared goal of evangelizing the world in this generation was not always clearly defined and debates about the meaning of this task continued, it is not hard to see how a basic theological optimism combined with a sense of the value of Western civilization and of one’s own achievements would indeed provide strong bonds. Ambivalence here did not contribute to resistance but came to support the project: “Sometimes Mott and his co-workers succeeded in keeping the new and fragile ecumenical boat afloat with the aid of fortuitous or unintentional ambiguities.”

Empire lurks in the back, albeit in postcolonial fashion. Bosch describes the situation thus: “The United States was not involved in the scramble for colonies; missions, however, provided Americans with an important ‘moral

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equivalent’ for imperialism.” Just like the Northern European colonial powers were proud of having avoided the atrocities of the Spanish conquest, the United States were proud about having mostly avoided colonial entanglements. Foreign missions were seen as “national altruism” (Bosch’s term), responding to what Mott called “the range and depths of human need, and of the infinite value of Christ’s program to meet it.”

Most interesting is the fact that mission was less and less seen as a one-way street. Here is Hempton’s take on the development of overseas missions: “On the whole they believed in forming partnerships with local people and not lording over them.” The approach of Mott follows this pattern as well. Nevertheless, in this partnership Mott identifies a clear top-down structure: “God has given to some movements a larger and richer experience than others.” The narrative begins with the U.S. and then moves on to Britain: “Because of her world-wide empire Great Britain is able … to do more for missions than any other land. Fully one third of the non-Christian world is under her own flag, and her political influence is probably great with another third than is that of any other Protestant power.” Germany is next, since “the German universities are the most influential in the world of thought.”

The later Mott appears to be somewhat more enlightened, calling for an end to the distinction between “sending” and “receiving” churches in 1928. Still, as Bosch notes, the younger churches did not quite experience it that way. Mott’s emphasis on collaboration is indeed skewed: While Christ calls for Christian leaders to “transcend” their “denominational, party, national, and racial boundaries,” the “younger Churches” still need the guidance of the older churches as they go their own ways since “we must now keep in view the necessity that these young Churches be preserved from isolation.” Mott notes that both the younger and the older churches benefit from collaboration, but collaboration is in firm hands as the “mission boards of Europe and North America” begin to “unite in sending out to the fields which they are serving groups of their most statesmanlike representatives to take counsel with the trusted leaders of the Churches and missions.” While Mott rejects “any sense of superiority or inferiority,” a “full recognition of the varieties of Christian experience,” and “a frank admission

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14 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 301.
18 Mott, *Strategic Points in the World’s Conquest*, 20; 30-31; 34.
21 Mott, *Cooperation*, 13; 34.
that no one member of the group possesses all the truth, but that each has some special contribution,” there is nowhere a call for the reversal of power structures. This particular embodiment of what we today might call “unity in difference” leaves the conventional power structures intact.

There is no reason to doubt that Mott’s intentions were benevolent and that he took his theological commitments seriously. In all this, he sought not only to follow Christ but to extend the reach of Christ. Yet here Christ as Lord looked suspiciously like the lords of the age, like the politicians or the business leaders with whom Mott was in close relation and who shared and supported his ambitious goals. What was lost was a sense that the lordship of Christ might take alternative shapes that challenge even the most benevolent status quo. While this was the general mood of the age, critical voices were also projected early on. Already in 1898, an article in the Methodist Review pointed out the close link missionary and colonial interests: “There is no chance to shut one’s eyes to the relation of missions to the success of governmental colonizing schemes.”

The quest for a theological surplus is not only ours.

There is indeed a theological surplus to be mined here. It can perhaps best be seen in a different area that today escapes the attention of most of the churches: the world of labor. It cannot be denied that Methodism thrived under the rules of Adam Smith’s capitalism. There are clear parallels between Methodism and Adam Smith’s model of a “religious free market” including its character as popular religious association, its emphasis on discipline, and the fact that it was financed by voluntary contributions and book sales. Yet capitalism and the industrial revolution created strong tensions, especially for the workforces that ensured its success. Wesley and some of the early Methodists were aware of these problems. And while in the course of the nineteenth century this awareness faded, it was to be recovered at the turn of the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with the force of its global expansion growing ever stronger, Methodism had become mostly middle class. Religious virtue and economic success were associated, as were economic failure and immorality. The current phenomenon of the “Gospel of Prosperity” has deep roots in the logic of middle class theology and is shared by the mainline churches insofar as God is commonly identified at the top and with

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22 Mott, Cooperation, 15; 29.
23 “One of the most nobly useful men in the world,” is President Wilson’s assessment of Mott in 1914 (Hopkins, John R. Mott, 435). Keep in mind that the funding sources for Mott’s projects were tremendous. The extremely wealthy, including the Robber Barons and their heirs “early trusted him to spend, or invest, a part of their surplus in instrumentalities dedicated to human betterment through religious agencies.” Hopkins, ibid., 51.
25 Hempton, Methodism, 46-47.
the successful—an issue that is still not openly addressed even today. Frederick Norwood puts it in strong words: “In every case the leadership of the local church has been dominated by the managerial class... Sometimes the churches have been practically owned by the dominant industrial power.” It might not be a bad idea to take a look at who dominates the leadership of the Methodist Churches today.

Nevertheless, the church did not abandon the workers altogether, thus preserving the source of another classic Methodist ambivalence that would lead not only to challenges to empire but also to a theological surplus. During the steel strike of 1919, for instance, the Interchurch World Movement and the Federal Council of Churches set up a commission of inquiry, which reported to President Wilson, chaired by none other than John R. Mott. This commission documented abuses of workers such as twelve-hour workdays, low pay, seven-day weeks, long shifts, and lack of input for workers. In the wake of this new awareness of labor issues, many of these evils were corrected and attitudes of church people changed.27 An early speech by Mott in 1893 captures a potential theological surplus emerging from his focus on Christ: “If Christ were to travel in our country today, he would be concerned about the poor and [in Andrew Carnegie’s phrase] could teach the rich the true ‘gospel of wealth.’” Mott thus anticipates the now popular question “What would Jesus do?” Yet since he does not perceive Jesus as walking among us, he argues that we need to “go back to Christ.”28 While a better question would be Frederick Herzog’s quest for what Jesus is doing now, Mott’s Christ implies a certain challenge to the status quo as theology begins to get in touch with the underside.

In a 1908 address Mott refers to Jesus in order to put an end to the all-too-common separation of religion and politics that tends to support the powers that be:

“Jesus Christ is Lord and therefore must reign. He only has authority to rule social practices. He must dominate His followers and all society in all their relationships: domestic, industrial, commercial, civic, national, and international.... There are not two gospels, one social and one individual. There is but one Christ.”

The Kingdom of God, Mott realizes, should include “the kingdoms of finance, commerce, industry, labor, the movies, the press, learning, and of society, because Christ is to be Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.” Clearly,

26 Norwood, The Story of American Methodism, 399; the comment is about the early twentieth century.
28 Hopkins, John R. Mott, 275.
there is some ambivalence here that challenges empire, especially when Mott talks about “the larger Christ” and the “larger evangelism.” What would happen if Christ cannot be relegated to a narrowly religious realm and if Christ is indeed somehow be concerned with those on the underside that the status quo refuses to notice?

To be sure, the perspective from below tends to become more popular in times of great pressure, and the Great Depression in the U.S. forced people to face basic economic questions and conditions. In 1930 even the Methodist Bishops noted deep problems “with a social system that, in the midst of plenteous abundance, dooms untold numbers of our people to unbearable poverty and distress through no apparent fault of their own.” While the first Methodist Social Creed was adopted already at the General Conference of 1908, this Creed was developed further in light of the tensions of industrialized society; subsequent embodiments of the Social Creed became the foundation for later legislation, like the eight-hour day, worker’s safety and compensation, social security, unionization, insurance, and retirement. The theological surplus can be identified when these issues are not seen as merely social or political ones (a common strategy to discount the importance of such perspectives) but as related to the reality of God in Christ.

While the foundations of empire remained in place, the fact that Methodism mustered a theological surplus and contributed to resistance needs to be noted in our own time, when much of this is hard to imagine. Can we today even envision a stance as the one taken by the Methodist Federation for Social Action in the 1930s, as: “an organization which seeks to abolish the profit system in order to develop a classless society based upon the obligation of mutual service”? Although this stance was not appreciated by everyone, it points to a theological surplus that cannot easily captured by the status quo and to a fundamental ambivalence that proves to be a challenge to any top-down power that seeks to control our lives and our images of God.

The Postcolonial empire

Within the confines of this essay this issue needs to be addressed more briefly. My comments are designed to indicate the need for a broader

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29 Hopkins, John R. Mott, 628.
32 Note that the beginning of the nineteenth century, the workday was 10 hours, six days a week; it went up from that to seventy ours a week; unionization and collective bargaining were opposed; Norwood, The Story of American Methodism, 399.
33 Norwood, The Story of American Methodism, 393
research project. Talking about a postcolonial empire appears, at first sight, to be counterintuitive. How can an empire exist without colonies? The current U.S. military initiative in Iraq helps illustrate what is at stake. Whatever the real interests of the administration of President George W. Bush to wage war against the nation of Iraq may have been, it is clear that no efforts were made to turn Iraq into a traditional colony. No U.S. governor was instituted, and Iraq was to maintain its national independence as well as its ownership of the land and natural resources. At the same time, the economic benefits for the U.S. are substantial. While the oil reserves are owned by Iraq, U.S. companies are competing for the rights of production; this is where the real money is made. Economically, these arrangements are much more convenient than previous colonial relations and they are much less visible; they are also more lucrative, as Adam Smith predicted. Once military activity ceases and everything appears back to normal, the public will hardly be aware of the structures of empire. In general, a postcolonial empire that operates on the basis of economic ties and other links at the level of culture and media (constantly expanding through new technologies) is not only less visible but also more effective and all-encompassing than early colonial models.

While some theologians may be aware of this issue, few have addressed its theological implications. Since the postcolonial empire is mostly invisible in the countries that benefit the most from it—except in times like the present when some governments engage in saber rattling of rather questionable success—few tend to notice and deal with the issue. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that since colonialism is a thing of the past we can go back to business as usual. While the famous book by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, thoroughly examines the failures of mission under colonialism, Bosch somehow assumes that since these times are behind us the churches can now celebrate the classical missionary spirit once again, in postmodern innocence.\(^\text{34}\)

This brings us to one of the key features of the postcolonial situation, which consists of an increasing cover-up of the powers of empire, accompanied by an ever further reach of those powers into our lives. Political and economic forces are joined by cultural forces (including media and technology), psychological forces (the advertising industry, for instance, seeks to impact our deepest desires), religious forces (not just the Religious Right but also other mainline ventures), etc. The asymmetry of power is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary situation, where resistance is supposed

\(^{34}\) For a fuller account see my essay “Theology and Mission in a Postcolonial World.” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 21:2 (2004), 201-27. I am not arguing against mission as such; my point is that we need to become aware of the current asymmetries of power before we can take up the matter again.
to be futile, an assumption that is internalized by many. In this context, the problem is not only with direct support of empire. Mainline efforts at pursuing a middle road also become quite problematic. Friedrich von Logau's saying that “in situations of great danger and need the middle road leads to death” applies here. When power is distributed asymmetrically, those who gather in the middle will inevitably be drawn in the direction of the greater pull and what is worse, this happens mostly without detection. In the contemporary U.S., the so-called “centrists” are invariably pulled to the political right, whether or not they are aware of it and whether or not they subscribe to its tenets. It would be quite interesting to examine for instance Albert Outler’s groundbreaking efforts as a centrist (working towards a “right-and-center coalition”) in this light, as well as Scott Jones’ notion of Methodist doctrine as the “Extreme Center.” What does it really mean to claim, as Jones does, that “on the theological spectrum Wesley occupies the extreme center” and to assume that this is the place of the United Methodist Church? It seems to me that if Wesley did bring together “extremes” like evangelism and justice ministries or worship and social action, it was not for the sake of finding a “balance” or “middle road”; rather, as those elements met in the lives of those following Christ, a new radical position emerged that was not afraid to take the side of the outcasts—a surplus bigger than the sum of its parts—and this points to the genius and the energy of Methodism.

A recent comment by Jones regarding the construction of a library and a partisan political institute by the Bush Foundation in honor of President George W. Bush at Southern Methodist University shines some light on the problem: “I know that George W. Bush’s membership in the United Methodist Church has been controversial for some in our church who disagree with his policies. Our Church embraces a wide spectrum of political views and I am proud of this. I am grateful that the UMC includes both Senator Hilary Clinton and President Bush as active, faithful members. At times I disagree with both, and at times I agree with both. But they are my sister and brother in Christ, and I claim them as part of my United Methodist family.” Obviously, this statement is written by a centrist who sees no need

35 For more detail see my essay “The Middle Road Leads to Death,” Zion’s Herald 180:1 (January/February 2006), 5, 6, 44.
36 This term is used in one of Outler’s letters to Ed Robb, reproduced in Riley B. Case, Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 220.
37 Scott J. Jones, United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 19; Jones assumes that a middle road exists between worship and social action, evangelism and justice ministries, spiritual formation and political involvement.
38 Scott J. Jones, e-mail sent to 120 Bishops of the United Methodist Church in January 2007. For a report see: http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=2429867&ct=3456005
to raise the bigger question whether “right” and “left” in this spectrum are true to the mission of the church. Membership in the UMC seems to be sufficient, and the main task of the centrist is to find a comfortable middle ground in the context of some standard U.S. view of “right” and “left”—neither of which is free from empire, despite different preferences for “hard” (Bush) or “soft” (Clinton) power. There is little awareness that there may be a place that is outside of this spectrum altogether—and that this place might be where God is found at work; as a result, no search for a theological surplus is required.

The middle road is crucial for the postcolonial empire because it allows for undetected moves in the direction of the powers that be; in addition, it also provides the kind of stability that buffers the more extreme adventures of empire, like the unsuccessful military efforts of the U.S. in recent years. Finally, the middle road guarantees that the more extreme moves of empire will stay with us for a long time to come because they are now embedded in the nature of the middle road. In the U.S., the middle road in the current U.S. is now further to the right than it was just a few years ago and it will not swing back quickly, even after the aggressive politics of the Bush administration have faded. Not long ago I heard a report from one of the largest Methodist churches in Texas where it appears to be no longer acceptable to speak of the poor: any mention of the poor is now seen as ideological. Barbara Wendland reports about church newsletters which give the title “Centurions” to members who pledge several thousand dollars to the church, a title that is said to signify “the exemplary model of honorable and courageous leadership. This leadership enabled the Roman Army to achieve what many believed to be impossible.”

Where is the theological surplus in this situation? There is plenty of resistance, although this is frequently not reported by the official channels. For the past couple of years, I have come to know a substantial number of people who are on the verge of leaving or have left the United Methodist church (both in the U.S. and in Europe), not because they have lost faith but because they have a sense that the church trivializes the Christian faith and that it has given up the search for any theological surplus that pushes beyond the confines status quo (whether defined by Bush or Clinton). There is a growing level of the kind of ambivalence from below that challenges both the self-confidence of the empire and the cozy middle road. Unfortunately, this is often mistaken for a lack of faith or of commitment. Yet in a

situation where notions like the lordship of Christ or the power of God are used to shore up the status quo of the empire, any effort to question leads to a deeper sense of divine reality that is not available to those who simply repeat mindlessly. The challenge here is to put this sort of ambivalence to productive use and to rethink the Christian heritage in constructive fashion, understanding how our theological traditions have been shaped by empire (consciously and unconsciously), and how we can we develop a sense for their theological surplus.  

Conclusions

Recently a flier announcing a lecture promised to examine the question “whether the received gospel was the interposition of Roman governmental authorities.” It is fairly safe to assume that not even the Roman governmental authorities mustered enough power to define the religion of the people. Under the conditions of postcolonial empire it is even less the case that government officials can tell the churches exactly what to believe. But this is hardly necessary, now less than ever. The powers of empire are diffuse and work best under ground, at the level of the subconscious. When the empire shapes our logic, no one needs to tell us what a “lord” is, what to understand by “love” and “justice,” and how to interpret God’s “omnipotence”; the theological success of empire is assured since it shapes these notions unconsciously.

The question is whether in this situation there is still a chance of religion not going “from the greatest to the least” (Wesley). Can God yet surprise us and push us beyond the (theological) logic of the empire or the confines of the ecclesial middle road? Is ambivalence able to point us to transcendence—not the ethereal kind of “pie in the sky” but the kind that transcends the status quo? Is there a reality that is not determined by top-down power? Can religion go the other way around? In the beginnings, the Methodist movement embodied this other reality. Let’s see what is possible today.

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40 This is the project of my book Christ and Empire, where I seek to reclaim Paul’s notion of the lordship of Christ, the insistence of Christ’s full divinity and humanity as developed in the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, Anselm’s notion of the God-human, Las Casas’ notion of the Way of Christ, Schleiermacher’s appropriation of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, Aulén’s Christus Victor, and Matthew Fox’s Cosmic Christ.